LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE

PARSHAS BO

BY

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE

ESSAYS ON PARSHAS BO

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Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption

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B"H

INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Bo* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

"The time of your Redemption has arrived."

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our

understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus*/exile mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Bo is obviously a fundamental parsha with respect to Redemption for it is the parsha that describes the very first Redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage which is the forerunner of all other Redemptions including the Messianic one

ESSAY ONE

TEN PLAGUE THERAPY

Most of the time we pray for Redemption because of all the negatives we now have in our world and in our personal lives.

Sometimes the emotional stimuli for wanting to get out of exile can come from the opposite *positive* direction; incredible positive changes have been seen in the world.

These changes, the Rebbe revealed to us, are a taste of and prelude to the "real thing—the true and complete Redemption.

All of these positive developments, ranging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, last bastion of anti-Jewish and anti-Torah tyranny, to many incredible medical advances, should whet our appetite for the "full gourmet banquet" that will follow, imminently.

ESSAY ONE

TEN PLAGUE THERAPY

Ten Plagues Divided

The Ten Plagues are divided in the Torah over two segments. Seven of them were described in last week's parsha and the final three are in this week's parsha.

The question has been asked, why this division?

One approach to answering this question is based on the notion that the Ten Plagues were directed not just against the bodies and property of the Egyptian people, but also against their personalities. A human being consists of Ten Faculties (corresponding to and derived from the Ten Divine Attributes) divided into two categories; three are intellectual faculties with seven emotional ones.

The Alter Rebbe, in his classic work the Tanya, traces the difference between the Ten Faculties of our G-dly Souls and how they differ from the parallel Ten Attributes of our Animal Souls. The G-dly Soul is governed by its intellect, which control the emotions. In stark contrast, the Animal

Soul is primarily governed by its emotions, and uses its intellect as a means to serve its emotional end.

Egypt and the Egyptian exile symbolize and embody the lowliest manifestation of the Animal Soul's emotional state. This is particularly true of their desire to enslave and persecute the children of Israel. That desire was born out of their hatred for the children of Israel. As the Torah stated in an earlier Parsha: "They became disgusted with the children of Israel." Once their negative emotions peaked, they used their superior intellectual prowess to find ways to suppress the Jewish people. The Torah illustrates the use of their intellect with the words of Pharaoh, "Let us outsmart [them]." Egypt harnessed the power of its collective depraved mind to satisfy its decadent and cruel emotional priorities.

To counter the emotional evil of the Egyptians, G-d sent seven plagues, each directed at one of the seven character traits.

However, it would have been impossible to completely eradicate the Egyptian evil without also directly attacking its vicious mindset. That was the target of the last three plagues, recounted in this week's parsha.

Oriented by this introduction we can proceed to explain the significance of the last three plagues: Locusts, Darkness and the Plague of the Firstborn.

Three Plagues: *Da'as, Binah* and *Chochma*

The last of three intellectual levels—and the one closest to the emotions—is *Da'as,* the ability to attach oneself to an idea. Without *Da'as* one cannot generate feelings even if one fully understands the idea. *Da'as* is the bridge between the intellect and emotions. Hence it was the first target of the three plagues recorded in this week's parsha, which aimed to undo the power of the Egyptians to harness their evil ideas to their emotions.

The first of the final triad of plagues was locusts, which devoured the grain of Egypt. Chassidic literature connects knowledge with grain, based on the statement of our Sages that: "A child does not know how to call his father until he eats grain." Along with the physical destruction of the grain supply the plague was a concomitant assault on the Egyptians' power of *Da'as*.

The next plague was darkness which, in spiritual terms, can mean the absence of *Binah*, the faculty responsible for shedding light on a subject. Absent a full blown examination of a subject one is left "in the dark." Hence the plague of darkness was directed against the Egyptian *Binah*-mindset. After this plague struck, the Egyptians were no longer capable of developing a sophisticated intellectual model for evil.

The final plague, the death of the firstborns, alludes to *Chochma*, which is the "first born" intellectual power; the power to conceive of an idea, on the basis of which one may develop a full understanding. The literal death of the first-borns was paralleled by the destruction of the Egyptian mindset responsible for conceiving of the persecution of the Jewish people.

Only after Divine demolition of the Egyptian mindset, which had crept by osmosis into the Jewish nation's consciousness, were the children of Israel truly able to escape the Egyptian exile. Their physical bondage only ended because they had also defeated the Egyptian way of life; until then the emotional and intellectual foundation of the exile would have held its power to control them.

A Two Pronged Attack

It is well known that the Rebbe emphasized the study of the subject of Moshiach and Redemption in our own day and age, as we stand on the threshold of the final Redemption. The lesson of the Plagues has much to teach us about the challenges we face today. We easily recognize our need to physically get out of exile and have Moshiach lead us to the construction of the Bais Hamikdash but it is equally important that we strategize how to get out of our *internal* exile. To that end we must divide our "attack" and

fight our battle on two fronts: the emotional and the intellectual

The assault on our emotional attachment to exile can be mounted based on all of the *negatives* we still experience. When we witness the threats from those who would destroy the Jewish people or the Land of Israel, G-d forbid, it weakens our love affair with exile; we cry out "*Ad Masai*- How much longer?!" When we read of the tragic passing of people afflicted with terrible diseases or who suffer incredible pain, our hearts go out to them and we cry out to G-d: "we can't handle the ravages of exile any longer!"

The more we feel the biting pain of exile the more intolerable exile becomes the more we can start struggling free of our internal exile.

As we become more spiritually refined, we begin to understand that in exile G-d also "suffers." G-d revealed Himself to Moses via a burning bush, our Sages tell us, to indicate that "I am with them in distress." G-d now puts Himself in our shoes, so to speak, and pleads with us to do our part in bringing Moshiach and release Him from self-imposed exile.

Sometime the emotional stimuli for wanting to get out of exile can come from the opposite *positive* direction; incredible positive changes have been seen in the world. These changes, the Rebbe revealed to us, are due to the

efforts of Moshiach. They are a taste of and prelude to the "real thing—the true and complete Redemption. All of these positive developments, ranging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, last bastion of anti-Jewish and anti-Torah tyranny, to many incredible medical advances, should whet our appetite for the "full gourmet banquet" that will follow, imminently.

However, we can only succeed in completely eradicating every trace of exile resistance when we also attack the intellectual impediments to Geulah.

This is where the Rebbe's directive to learn the subjects of Moshiach and Geulah in the Torah enters the picture. To counter the negative intellectual underpinnings, the mindset of exile, we must reorient our minds to see things through the liberating prism of Torah.

Ten Plague Mnemonic

We can now understand more deeply a section of the Haggadah we recite Passover night at the Seder. After listing the Ten Plagues, the Haggadah states:

"Rabbi Yehudah would use a mnemonic: *D'tzach, Adash B'achav* [the initials of the Ten Plagues]".

Now why did Rabbi Yehudah find it necessary to provide a mnemonic for the Ten Plagues? And why does the author

of the Haggadah find it necessary to tell us that Rabbi Yehudah used his mnemonic for the Plagues?

Rabbi Yehudah was acutely aware that the purpose of the Seder goes beyond thanking G-d for liberating us. That is admirable, but it is not enough. Today the primary purpose of remembering the plagues is to help us understand our role in breaking this final exile. We too must use a Ten Plague therapy to rid ourselves of any attachment to, allegiance with or affinity with exile. We need to reflect on the Ten Plagues to help us assault our own exile; both its emotional and its intellectual components.

Missing even one of the Ten Plagues would amount to leaving us with one, albeit small, vestige or seed of exile mentality or feeling. As a result, we would fail to liberate ourselves from internal exile. Unless eradicated, even a seed of exile can blossom into a full-fledged exile mentality. Rabbi Yehudah, whose name symbolizes Messianic leadership (Jacob's son Yehudah was the ancestor of Moshiach), could not afford to let us miss mentioning and internalizing even one of the plagues, lest it keep us in our own personal Galus.

That is why Rabbi Yehudah provided us with a mnemonic. It is a powerful memory aid to keep us from forgetting how to combat exile.

We can now better understand the words of the Haggadah, the literal translation of which is: "Rabbi Yehudah would give **them** a mnemonic." Who is the "them?" The simple meaning is that it refers to the plagues; he supplied a mnemonic to help us recall each of the Ten Plagues. But, isn't that obvious? Why not just state: "Rabbi Yehudah gave a mnemonic."

Firing on All Our Cylinders!

We may suggest that Rabbi Yehudah, the man who symbolizes Moshiach and Redemption, instructed the Jewish people with his mnemonic to instill within **them** the memory of all the Ten Plagues. He wanted to ensure that we don't forget to use Ten Plague therapy for getting out of exile by internalizing each and every Plague, not stop at just reciting them. Our efforts to banish the Galus mindset cannot be a superficial exercise; it must become an integral part of our personality.

One of the symptoms of exile is forgetfulness. We forget things that are not essential to us. We forget things that are separate entities from ourselves. We don't forget things that are part and parcel of who we are. Rabbi Yehudah intended to place these reminders into "**them**," the Jewish people of all times, so that we can never forget that we

need to be firing on **all** our cylinders to complete our journey to Geulah!

ESSAY TWO

THE TWO PRONGED APPROACH

Freedom can be experienced on many levels.

To the extent that we follow the dictates of the G-dly soul over the desires of the animal soul we determine the degree to which we are free.

If we do the right thing for ulterior motives our state of freedom is imperfect.

When we are not totally free, we can easily relapse into a state of servitude to our base instincts and animalistic tendencies.

ESSAY TWO

THE TWO PRONGED APPROACH

The Two Conditions

Just before their departure from Egypt the Jewish people were given two commandments: To sacrifice a lamb as a Paschal sacrifice and to circumcise all males.

The Talmudic sage, Rabbi *Matya ben Charash* (quoted by Rashi) explains the significance of these two commandments at that time:

> "The time had come for Me to keep My oath that I had made to the patriarchs, that I will redeem their children. Alas, they did not have any Mitzvos in their hands with which to be preoccupied, so that they may be redeemed, as it says, 'And you were naked and bare [of Mitzvos].' He, therefore, gave them then two precepts, the blood of the Paschal sacrifice and the blood of circumcision."

Two questions can be raised concerning Rabbi Matya's teaching:

First, why did G-d give them these two Mitzvos specifically?

Secondly, why did He have to give them **two** commandments? Even if they had observed one Mitzvah they would no longer have been considered "naked," from the spiritual point of view.

True Freedom

Going out of Egypt is the act of breaking out of the mold that limits and stifles our spiritual growth. As we shall see, in order for one to truly be liberated they must adopt a two pronged approach.

Freedom is not the absence of obligations or burdens. True freedom is defined as the ability to be true to one's inner self. In spiritual terms this translates as the ability to express our soul's desires. When there is either an external or internal force that imposes its will on us that impedes the soul from expressing its most natural self—that is bondage. When we remove the barriers to the soul we are free.

But freedom can be experienced on many levels. To the extent that we follow the dictates of the G-dly soul over the desires of the animal soul we determine the degree to which we are free. In other words, if a person does the right thing not exclusively due to the influence of one's

soul, but for ulterior motives, their state of freedom is imperfect. And when one is not totally free, they can easily relapse into a state of servitude to their base instincts and animalistic tendencies.

How does one achieve complete freedom? When one has become totally subservient to the will of G-d, which is the soul's greatest passion, they are absolutely free.

The Test

The question that arises here is, how does one know when their devotion to G-d is complete?

How does one know that the devotion is not a product of one's animal nature?

One way of determining the source of one's dedication is to see whether they go in one direction or whether they are capable of doing things in two directions.

For example, if a person who is naturally inclined towards kindness devotes his or her life to doing acts of kindness it may not be an expression of the G-dly soul. This person's soul might still be in Mitzraim. How do we know that this person's desire to do kindness is pure and holy? When the kind person manages to occasionally go **against** his nature of kindness and perform acts of judgment in the quest to do the right thing—that is a sign that one's devotion is not

merely a product of their nature, but is an expression of their G-dly soul. It is a sign that they have achieved total freedom.

We can now understand why the Jews leaving the Egyptian exile into freedom had to perform **two** Mitzvos to remove the stigma of "spiritual nakedness." Had they just performed one Mitzvah it would not have guaranteed that they were expressing their soul's aspiration. Now that they performed both—the Paschal lamb and circumcision—it was a clear indication that they were capable of breaking out of their internal exile.

Combining Two Opposites

These two Mitzvos reflect opposite directions on several levels:

First, as noted above, the Paschal lamb was a repudiation of idolatry (rejecting evil) motivated by a sense of utter judgment of the futility and evil of idol worship, whereas circumcision was an act of utter devotion (doing good), involving the trait of love.

Second, the Paschal Lamb was done in public. It was intended to be an "in your face" gesture. Circumcision was a private experience. There are people who will only do the right thing in public to gain recognition and glory, while

others are, by nature, extremely private and will only do things when no one else is around.

Third, while both the Paschal lamb and circumcision were sacrifices, the former involved sacrificing of one's property, whereas the latter was the sacrifice of one's own flesh and blood. The Talmud refers to two personality types, one that cares for their life more than their property and one who cares more for their property than their life. One must love G-d, the Talmud states, by being prepared to do both: To "love G-d with all your soul" (i.e., even be prepared to give your life for Him) and "with all your might (or, resources)" (i.e., even be prepared to give up all your possessions not to betray your love for G-d). The two sacrifices at the time of the Exodus combined both of these opposite personality types.

In short, by performing these two diametrically opposite forms of Mitzvos, they demonstrated that they had the capacity to experience true freedom.

Getting Out of Our Internal Exile

The application to our own day and age on the threshold of the Messianic Age is can be explained as follows:

Part of the process of Redemption is to get ourselves out of our own internal exile. To be sure, Moshiach can take us out of exile—both the physical and spiritual—even if we

are not ready, but it is far more desirable to be part of the process.

One way of experiencing true freedom is to employ opposite approaches in our service to G-d and humanity. By fusing our Torah study with practical Mitzvos, emotional heartfelt prayer with rigid Talmudic logic, introspecting and performing public acts of goodness, kindness and high standards, simple faith with profound philosophical analysis etc., we will exercise of our soul's ability to express its desires. Once the soul is free we are well on the way to the total state of freedom and Redemption.

Combining Intellectual and Emotional Approach

There is another way of applying the paradoxical "two Mitzvah" approach to our preparations for the final Redemption.

In the aftermath of the Redemption two things will change dramatically. While the laws of nature do not have to be suspended and supernatural phenomena is not necessarily the rule for the Messianic Age as Maimonides writes, nevertheless, there will be two major changes:

First, the entire world will recognize the one G-d. Idolatry—in all of its forms subtle and not so subtle—will disappear because G-d; unity will be fully revealed. This will

be an intellectual achievement that we will all be able to comprehend G-dliness.

Second, the spirit of impurity will we removed, and G-d will "circumcise the foreskin of our hearts." The insensitivity to spirituality will no longer exist because the occlusion and obstruction to our heart will be removed. The world will become a more refined world. This change involves our emotional makeup.

Our preparation to this period must therefore contain both an intellectual component and an emotional component; we must study the teachings of Chassidus that introduces us to the understanding of the unity of G-d in its most advanced form.

But, that does not suffice. We must also work on the refinement of our hearts and emotions, mostly through prayer—which our Sages defined as "Service of the heart."

The combined force of these two efforts—that parallel the offering of the Paschal lamb (which negates idolatry) and the circumcision (that removes the impediments to our soul's self-expression)—will be the catalysts that will usher in the Messianic Age, through our righteous Moshiach.

ESSAY THREE

DON'T LET YOUR MITZVOS BECOME SOUR

Guarding the Matzah represents maintaining humility and not letting our egos gain control over us.

When we are not careful about our Matzah, and our egos swell, it is likely that we will postpone the execution of a Mitzvah; we will wait to first convince ourselves about the importance of the Mitzvah.

We will try to find—whether consciously or subconsciously—a good rationalization for doing the Mitzvah in terms of what is in it for us.

A person, who is consumed with a sense of self-importance, will never defer to someone else's judgment.

Only a person who is humble will readily yield to G-d's will even before they fully understand its subjective and objective value.

ESSAY THREE

DON'T LET YOUR MITZVOS BECOME SOUR

Matzos or Mitzvos?

In this week's parsha the Torah details the way the first Passover was observed. The Jews were commanded among other things to bake and eat Matzah. The way in which this command is introduced is with the words "You shall guard the Matzos." The meaning of "guarding" is to insure that the mixture of flour and water is not allowed to rise and become "leavened."

The word Matzos, when written in Hebrew without vowels, allows for an alternate reading. Instead of the world Matzos, it can read Mitzvos, which means commandments. Accordingly, the Talmudic sages reinterpret this verse to mean:

> "Guard the Mitzvos that they do not become sour/leavened."

When one has an opportunity to do a Mitzvah, one should do it without any delay.

What began as a specific prescription for the proper preparation of the Matzah now becomes a general and sweeping exhortation concerning the way we approach the observance of all the Mitzvos.

The question that one may ask is why the Torah chose the Mitzvah of Matzah to impart the lesson of not procrastinating in doing a Mitzvah?

Matzah Insurance and the Ari's Guarantee

One answer given is based on the teaching of the great Kabbalist the Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria-Ashkenazi of the sixteenth century—yes, they had hyphenated surnames even then). According to the Ari, if we are careful not to possess even the most insignificant amount of Chometz (leavened bread or bread products), we will be assured that we will not transgress throughout the rest of the year.

In other words, eating of Matzah and its converse, not eating or possessing Chometz, relates to the observance of all of the commandments. Therefore, when the Torah wants to admonish us about guarding the observance of our Mitzvos, it chose the Mitzvah of Matzah because, indeed, it relates to all of the Mitzvos.

However, this answer merely transfers the question to the teaching of the Ari. Why did the Ari maintain that scrupulous observance of the Chometz interdiction will

affect the observance of all of the commandments that we will perform throughout the rest of the year? Nowhere does it say that by proper observance of the Mitzvah to eat in a Sukkah during the Holiday of Sukkos, for example, will in any way guarantee the observance of other commandments during the rest of the year. What distinguishes the Mitzvah of Matzah and the prohibition of Chometz from all other seasonal observances?

Chometz-Ego-Centric

One approach to this is that Chometz and Matzah are said to symbolize the difference in attitude between one who is egocentric—whose every act, word or thought revolves around themselves—and the one who is G-d and people centric. These "Chometz" "ego driven" personalities are compared to the flour and water that is allowed to rise and become inflated with air. They compare unfavorably with the Matzah personality whose egos are in check and whose lives revolve around G-d and the need to help others.

Guarding our Matzah is another way of saying preserving the natural state of our soul to be humble and recognize its G-dly source. To neglect our Matzah (read: ego-less mindset) is to make us vulnerable to all the negative possibilities. If we preserve the integrity of our Matzah we also fortify ourselves and ensure the integrity of all our

Judaism. One who is obsessed with his own needs and desires will lose the sensitivity to the needs and desires of G-d and other people.

In this spirit the Ari's teaching is that one who is careful to eradicate the Chometz, the egocentric inclinations one possesses, will also discover they are more likely to resist the temptations to which others would ordinarily succumb.

"A Mitzvah that comes to your *hand*..."

There is an even deeper lesson from the above.

When Rashi cites this interpretation he expresses it in the following way: "A Mitzvah that comes to your hand don't delay it."

What does Rashi mean when he speaks of a Mitzvah that comes to 'your hand?" Why couldn't Rashi have stated simply: "One should not delay the performance of a Mitzvah."

By stating "a Mitzvah that comes to your hand" Rashi is including a more sophisticated form of procrastination. The verse is not merely talking about a person who postpones doing a Mitzvah because of laziness. It can also be referring to someone who has the opportunity to act on the Mitzvah, but feels that they are not ready for it. They want to first study the reasons for the Mitzvah and psyche themselves up for it before they actually act on it. They may reason that doing a Mitzvah without the requisite feeling for the

Mitzvah is devoid of meaning and purpose. One might argue, "If I don't feel like helping my neighbor, then perhaps, I must wait to start feeling the need to help, before I act."

To negate this mindset and reason for delay of a Mitzvah, Rashi therefore emphasizes, "a Mitzvah that come to your **hand**," meaning that if you have the ability to act on the performance of the Mitzvah with your hands—even if your mind and heart are not yet in it—don't delay doing it. Act first and then learn about the deeper meaning for what you've accomplished.

This Too is based on Humility

And this lesson too has a connection to the guarding of Matzah lest it become leavened.

As explained above, guarding the Matzah represents maintaining humility and not letting our egos gain control over us. When we are not careful about our Matzah, and our egos swell, it is likely that we will postpone the execution of a Mitzvah; we will wait to first convince ourselves about the importance of the Mitzvah. We will try to find—whether consciously or subconsciously—a good rationalization for doing the Mitzvah in terms of what is in it for us. A person, who is consumed with a sense of self-importance, will never defer to someone else's judgment.

Only a person who is humble will readily yield to G-d's will even before they fully understand its subjective and objective value.

Rashi therefore tells us that the only valid consideration for the observance of a Mitzvah is whether it comes to your hand. If you know it's a Mitzvah and you have the physical ability to do it—do it!

G-d's Mitzvah: Don't Postpone the Redemtion!

Our Sages tell us that every commandment that G-d gives us, He keeps as well.

Of all the Mitzvos, our Sages tell us, it is the Mitzvah to redeem captives that is regarded as the greatest. Thus, if we are obligated to liberate those who are held captive from captivity, then it follows that G-d too has the Mitzvah of redeeming us from exile. And even for the majority of Jews who live in free societies, we still are in a spiritual exile.

We therefore respectfully approach G-d in our prayers and say to Him:

> "G-d, You commanded us to redeem captives and you also commanded us to not delay the performance of a Mitzvah. Please, do the same and redeem us from exile, now! And for whatever reason You might feel that the Redemption can be postponed, please realize that the Torah teaches us that one may not delay the execution of a Mitzvah."

G-d might then argue to us that His heart is not in it, for perhaps we have not done enough to "affect" G-d's feelings for us, as it were. G-d might therefore be waiting to "have His heart in it" by waiting for us to show our devotion to Him.

Our response to this argument is,

> "G-d You yourself told us that when a Mitzvah comes to your hand, i.e., when you have an opportunity to do a Mitzvah, don't wait for your heart to be in it. Just do the Mitzvah and the feelings will follow. G-d, please follow Your own laws and bring an end to the physical and spiritual exile and all the negativity that exile entails, and bring Moshiach now!"

ESSAY FOUR

WINDOWS 5778

The model of true freedom is the Exodus from Egypt.

The Israelites were not liberated to be free.

They were liberated to become a nation that would stand at Mount Sinai and receive G-d's constitution—the Torah with all of its commandments.

ESSAY FOUR

WINDOWS 5778

The Misconception of Freedom

The Exodus from Egypt—the theme of this week's parsha—highlights the benefits of freedom. This is an appropriate time to reflect on the blessing of freedom that we enjoy.

But first let us clear up some misconception about freedom, and on the institution of democracy that is a vehicle and expression of that freedom.

First, the idea that a free election represents an inherent and automatic improvement over no election is facile and dangerous. Is there anything positive about having the ability to freely vote for either a Hitler or a Stalin? If a system is based on evil ideas, giving us a choice to elect one tyrant and evil system or the other is not much of a choice.

For democracy to work, all candidates and parties they represent must believe in and stand for the values that make the difference between a righteous and evil society.

Judaism has established the criteria for a righteous society; one that is based on the Seven Noahide commandments that were initially given to Noah after the flood, and reiterated by G-d at Mount Sinai. These seven commandments are: Negation of: idolatry, blaspheme, theft, murder, sexual crimes, mistreating animals, and establishing a judiciary that will preserve these laws and guarantee the civility pf society.

But even a totally free society that is governed by basically decent people is not a panacea. Freedom has been erroneously depicted by many as an end and not just a means to an end. Being free from tyranny is a great blessing, but only because it provides us with the means to realize our G-d given potential. If freedom would cause us to forget who we are and what our purpose is as Jews, then freedom would be no better than tyranny, except for the fact that with freedom, the opportunity to get back on track is always there.

The Model of True Freedom

The model of true freedom is the Exodus from Egypt. They were not liberated to be free. They were liberated to become a nation that would stand at Mount Sinai and receive G-d's constitution—the Torah with all of its commandments.

We can now understand why we are obligated to remember the Exodus from Egypt each and every day. It behooves us to constantly reflect on the true nature of freedom, so that freedom does not degenerate into license.

Every Day and Every Night

The question, however, can be asked, why are we also obligated to remember the Exodus each and every night? Why wouldn't it suffice for us to mention it once every twenty-four hours?

The answer lies in the deeper meaning of bondage and liberation.

One could be totally free to live and behave the way one wishes to live and behave. Yet their soul can still be in an internal exile. And this internal exile can take two forms: night and day.

Opening Three Windows

Night symbolizes a time when there is no light in our lives; we feel darkness and loneliness. We feel distant from G-d and our people. It may be in middle of the day, but our soul experiences night and darkness. This feeling occurs when we don't see or feel the light of the soul, because we have failed to open up windows that would allow the sunshine to enter our consciousness.

These windows can be opened three ways: by prayer, Torah study and the performance of the Mitzvos. In each of these spiritual exercises our Talmudic sages, and particularly our Chassidic sages, have emphasized the need for kavvanah, which may be translated "intent" or "concentration," but also as "windows." Remembering the Exodus every night is the impetus to do all that we have to do to open these windows for our soul. In the Shema, the themes of performing all the Mitzvos and the remembrance of the Exodus are inextricably bound.

To be sure, even the most perfunctory manner in which we do G-dly acts, enables the light of the soul to radiate. But when we combine the performance of a G-dly act—which possesses objective liberating energies—with the subjective liberating element of kavvanah, i.e. focus, feeling and fervor, we then possess a guaranteed mechanism to experience the Exodus of our soul, even in a time of night.

Now the question reverses itself. Why must we also mention the Exodus in the daytime?

Day and light implies that the soul is shining brightly. There are no impediments to our soul's ability to express itself. And yet, we can still be in internal exile.

In the Dark in Broad Daylight

This can be understood on two intertwined levels.

It has been explained on numerous occasions that the word Egypt in Hebrew, Mitzraim, derives from a root word that means constraints or limits. No matter how much light we allow our soul to freely generate, there is always a need to "break out of the boundaries" that put limits on our spiritual life. One can be the most spiritually charged person, but he or she too must continually reexamine their status, and seek to go beyond the constraining parameters of their lives.

In addition, even when a person has freed himself or herself from the shackles of night, it is crucial that they go beyond themselves by reaching out to others. If we are naturally closest to ourselves, going out of Egypt-Mitzraim implies going out of ourselves; going beyond our own self-interests, even if they are totally spiritual and G-d oriented. The "day-personality" who feels content with his or her own spiritual accomplishments is usually someone who is still deep in bondage from which he or she must be liberated. While the spiritual sun is shining brightly, this individual can still be in the dark.

Hence, the need to mention the Exodus not just every night but also every day.

All of our prayers are directed to G-d to take us out of our personal exiles as well as bring us Moshiach who will take us out of the general and universal exile the entire Jewish nation, and indeed the entire world, is in. By working at

liberating ourselves from our internal exile—both the night and day forms of it—we create the force that will precipitate the imminent arrival of Moshiach and the complete and final Redemption.

ESSAY FIVE

FREE AND RICH

A Jew, from the time of the Exodus onward, says the Maharal (the great 16th century Talmudist, Kabbalist and leader), became an inherently free person.

A Jew cannot be truly subservient to others. It goes against his or her very nature and essence.

For a Jew to thrust himself into slavery once the dynamic energy of the Exodus began to be generated was a self-destructive act. Those Jews simply couldn't survive as slaves.

ESSAY FIVE

FREE AND RICH

The Two Functions of the Ninth Plague of Darkness

Of all the Ten Plagues, the most enigmatic is the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. If one is to assume that the plagues were getting progressively more painful, the ninth plague seems to be out of order. The eighth plague of locust destroyed their entire food supply, which would lead to mass starvation. Likewise many of the earlier plagues were life threatening or destructive to their infrastructure. The plague of darkness, by contrast, caused only fear and anxiety. Why then was this plague reserved for next to the last?

Rashi seemed to have anticipated this question. Rashi explains that this plague served two functions. First, during the plague of darkness the Israelites were able to survey all of the Egyptian's possessions. When they asked the Egyptians to give them their gold, silver and clothing, as per G-d's request to them that they do so, the Egyptians denied they had anything to give. Thereupon, the Israelites

stated that they saw their possessions and knew where they were hidden.

The need for this plague thus was to help the Jews take the wealth of Egypt with them as they departed as had been promised by G-d to Abraham.

The second reason for the plague of darkness, Rashi explains, was to facilitate the burial of those Jews who refused to leave Egypt and died out in the plague of darkness, so as to conceal this tragedy from the Egyptians.

Both explanations raise some serious questions:

First, why did those Jews who refused to be liberated have to die? Why was their reluctance to leave so serious a crime as to deserve death? Why couldn't they just be left behind to remain subservient to the Egyptians?

As for the first explanation, the question that can be raised is: why was it so important for the Israelites to see the treasures of Egypt during this plague of darkness? Surely, if G-d wanted them to leave with the wealth of Egypt they deserved as payment for their decades of slavery and torture, G-d could have found other ways of inducing the Egyptians to give then the wealth. Why did it have to come through the Israelites seeing this wealth during the plague of darkness?

Educating the Jews about their Role

The answer to both of these questions lies in the suggestion that with this plague of darkness G-d wanted not just to punish the Egyptians, but also to educate the Jewish people about their identity and role, and how they should view exile and liberation.

Punishment versus Consequence

The reason the Israelites that refused to be liberated died in the plague of darkness one may suggest was not a punishment but a consequence of who they were.

From the time of the Exodus onward, says the Maharal (the great 16th century Talmudist, Kabbalist and leader), a Jew became an inherently free person. A Jew, by his very constitution, cannot be truly subservient to others. It goes against the very nature and essence of a Jew. Freedom was programmed into the Jewish psyche at the time of the Exodus.

For a Jew to thrust himself into slavery once the dynamic energy of the Exodus was launched was a self-destructive act. Thus, the Jews who insisted on being slaves were engaged in acts of self-destruction.

Exile a Façade

This was the first message we were given at the time of our liberation. A Jew must know that he or she is essentially a free person whose existence is one that belongs to G-d alone. A Jew cannot tolerate any other master.

To be sure, Jews were subjected to many subsequent periods of exile and servitude. However, none of the Jews "masters" could exercise control over the inner spirit of the Jew.

And the message conveyed at the time of the Exodus was that a Jew should and could never make peace with being in exile. His or her essence is freedom. And we are given only one choice either to be free as Jews or to cease to exist.

Moshiach is Real!

To translate this message into practical terms: The Exodus instructs us as to what our attitude towards our being in exile must be. It also inspires us with hope for the imminent Redemption through Moshiach. Only then will the truth about our existence as free people will come to light for all to see.. A Jew has to realize that Moshiach and Redemption is real and is his or her true state, whereas exile is the façade and the temporary state.

Gathering the Treasures

But there is an even deeper message that the other explanation for the plague of darkness conveys. We were told to survey the Egyptian homes to find all of their treasures as a prelude to receiving them from the Egyptians. This means that even as we are still in exile and are eagerly anticipating the future liberation, we must know two things:

First, exile is not just a waiting game for the Redemption. Exile is when we sow the seeds that will blossom in the future. Exile is when we amass the treasures that will be in full view of the world in the Messianic Era.

Second, freedom is not just the absence of slavery and suffering.

Freedom, in the ultimate sense of the word, is when we gather the treasures—material and spiritual—that we generated in exile through our hard work, acts of Mitzvos, Torah study and heartfelt prayers and take it with us into the period of Redemption. Not only can we not stay behind; even these treasures we do not leave behind.

Not only is it important for us to know that we are inherently free people and that we have only one true Master, but that freedom is a patently positive and exciting experience that we must crave even when we enjoy the relative, provisional freedom of exile.

We yearn for Moshiach and Redemption because of the positive experience—the treasures—it will bring just as much as we yearn for the cessation of pain and suffering in exile.

ESSAY SIX

THE LAST THREE PLAGUES

There are two tiers of growth in our spiritual lives.

We begin with lessons that touch us on the surface and have a limited impact.

These temporary measures must be followed by more powerful influences that are all pervasive.

We must see to it that the message of liberation consumes us, penetrates to the very core of our existence and that it reveals that part of our soul that is immortal and everlasting.

ESSAY SIX

THE LAST THREE PLAGUES

Two Categories of Plagues

The Ten Plagues are divided into two categories. The first seven were discussed in last week's parsha, while the remaining three (locust, darkness and the death of the first-born) are reserved for this week's parsha.

When we read about these ten plagues, and more specifically the last three, two questions come to mind:

First, why were the last three plagues not discussed together with the first seven? Why did they have to be separated into two sections?

Second, why was the plague of darkness next to the last plague? From all accounts it appears that the plagues were progressively devastating. We can easily comprehend how the death of the first-born was the last of the plagues. We can even understand why the plague of locusts followed the six previous ones. By consuming all their food, people would starve to death. But to live in darkness for a few

days was just a nuisance and can hardly be compared to many of the earlier plagues.

The answer to these questions is that the three plagues that appear in this week's parsha are of an entirely different order.

While the first seven plagues were spectacular, destructive and painful, they were of a temporary duration. After the week of blood, the water returned to normal. The same is true for the frogs, lice, mixture of wild animals, the pestilence, boils and hail.

Human beings are extremely resilient creatures, Even when dealt a powerful blow, we have the ability to regain our strength to continue on with life and not be touched or significantly affected by the pain of the past. Even the pain at the loss of a loved one is gradually eased with the passage of time.

All Pervasive

The second set of plagues that are introduced in this week's parsha are of an entirely different order.

The plague of locust was all pervasive. It extended from one end of Egypt to the other. Moreover, it did not only impact their lives during the week of the plague itself, but it also affected the **future** of the Egyptian people. Without

their crops that year, famine and death would be widespread throughout the land.

In short, the plague of Locust was enduring and all-encompassing.

No Comfort

But even when one is afflicted with horrible suffering, the human condition enables them to find some measure of comfort and solace in the security of their home. Some people can withdraw into themselves and become impervious to the pain that touches their bodies.

The plague of darkness was so pervasive that it entered into their homes. The terror and paralysis that this darkness caused penetrated to the very core of their being. As our Sages tell us that one who was sitting at the onset of this plague could not stand and one who was standing could not sit. This means that the fear and terror was so profound that it left no "inner space" from which one can draw some measure of solace and enjoy some degree of respite.

If the plague of locust pervaded all of their outer space – "It will obscure the view of the earth" – the plague of darkness, in an unprecedented fashion, penetrated and permeated their "inner space."

No Immortality

And finally the plague of the first born came and extended the character of G-d's punishment of the Egyptians to a new depth.

The human being wants immortality, and we have it through our progeny.

This is why a parent will sacrifice everything – life and limb – for his or her child. The child represents the essence of the parent.

We can achieve this degree of immortality, more specifically, when our children follow in our footsteps and carry on the legacy we leave them. It is the most fervent wish of a person for his or her progeny to follow in their footsteps.

In ancient cultures, the first born was expected to assume the role of the father in the next generation. They were the priests and the leaders. With the death of the first-born Egyptians, they were not only dealt a devastating blow because the loss of one of their children, but it went even further. With this plague, that part of their being that is immortal was destroyed. There could not have been a greater blow to them than through this plague.

Two Tiers of our Education

As we mentioned in many of our essays, the plagues must also serve as educational tools for our own moral and spiritual development. The plagues can also be viewed as ways of energizing ourselves with spiritual power.

And since the Ten Plagues led to the Exodus from Egypt, it follows that by implementing the positive lessons from these plagues we are better prepared for the final Redemption through Moshiach. More specifically, since the plagues are divided into two phases, the lesson we are to derive from them must also be divided into two parts.

Upon reflection we will see that there are two tiers of growth in our spiritual lives.

We begin with lessons that touch us on the surface and have a limited impact.

These temporary measures must be followed by more powerful influences that are all pervasive; measures that parallel the qualitatively more dramatic last three plagues.

The Lesson of the Plague of Locusts: Breadth

When we attempt to extricate ourselves from the negative forces associated with Galus-exile, it does not suffice to pay mere lip service to the idea of Redemption. By remembering and mentioning the Exodus every day we set

the stage for internalization of the message of Redemption, which must affect every facet of our lives. In every aspect of our life—in all of our actions, speech and even thought—we must instill the message of Moshiach and Geulah/Redemption.

Every Mitzvah we do has to connect to the idea that I brings us a step closer to the Redemption and is what actually makes it happen. Even our mundane activities have to be inspired by our belief in the imminent coming of Moshiach.

In short, the entire view of the earth—i.e., our external personality expressed through our thought, speech and action, the way we see and know it now—will be obscured and overwhelmed by the force of Moshiach.

The Lesson of the Plague of Darkness: Depth

If the lesson of the plague of Locusts is that we must allow the message of Geulah spread through the breadth of our experience, the plague of darkness teaches us that we must allow the message of Geulah penetrate into the depth of our consciousness.

The message of liberation must penetrate beneath the surface, to the very core of our existence (corresponding to the plague of darkness),

This means that the desire for and preoccupation with Geulah goes beyond the external faculties of thought,

speech and action. It actually permeates our thought processes and emotions; the inner components of our personality. Our desire for Moshiach is heartfelt and deep because it expresses our most primal and essential feelings, just as the plague of darkness touched the very core of Egyptian society.

The Lesson of the Plague of the First-Born: Length

If the two preceding messages represent allowing the ideal of Redemption to pervade the breadth and depth of our experience, or the surface and subterranean levels of our personalities, the third message that we can derive from the last plague—the plague of the First Born—represents taking the message of Redemption and extending it "lengthwise" to the next generation.

This means that we cannot be content with making the message of Redemption resonate within our own psyche; we must also extend its message to the next generation.

However, there are two ways that we can view the transmission of our deals to the next generation. In can be by way of education, or it can by way of inheritance, whereby the child—particularly, the first born—actually takes the place of the parent. Inheritance according to the Torah does not involve the transfer of goods from one person to another; it is the one person becoming the other.

In this inheritance mode, the next generation derives from the essence of the preceding one. The child—and his child, ad infinitum—are all subsumed withn the soul of the father. And although the child might not inherit any of the father's faculties, he or she nevertheless inherits the very essence of their father's being.

Thus, the obsession with liberation on the third and higher level reveals that part of our soul that is immortal and everlasting (corresponding to the plague of the First-Born).

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: A Study in Parallels

And just as the genesis of the Jewish people involved the three stages of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so too, the final stage of the Jewish people's existence at the end of exile involves these three stages represented by the three plagues.

The parallel is even more striking:

Abraham spread the knowledge of one G-d to the widest possible audience—breadth.

Isaac dug wells—penetrating the surface of the earth—enabling the message of Abraham to penetrate into the inner consciousness of society—depth.

Jacob—who became the father of the eternal Jewish peple—represents taking the ideals of Judaism and

extending them to the end of time-length.

The Bottom Line

We must see to it that the message of liberation consumes us (corresponding to the plague of locusts) and penetrates to the very core of our existence (corresponding to the plague of darkness) and that it reveals that part of our soul that is immortal and everlasting (corresponding to the plague of the First-Born).

And while Judaism does not underestimate the power of even one Mitzvah, the Messianic Age is when we are capable of increasing our commitment, quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

ESSAY SEVEN

MOSES THE MATCHMAKER

Moses and Moshiach are the matchmakers between G-d and Israel.

A matchmaker does not separate between the two parties. Rather he or she brings them together.

Moses and Moshiach are the ultimate unifiers.

ESSAY SEVEN

MOSES THE MATCHMAKER

Do Not Delegate!

One of the rituals associated with the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt is the *Pidyon Haben*-Redemption of the first born. This ceremony, performed when a first-born male child completes his first thirty days of life, involves the father giving the equivalent five silver *shekalim* to a *kohain*.

The simple reason for this act is to acknowledge G-d's saving of the first born Israelite boys from the fate that awaited their Egyptian counterparts.

According to many authorities of Halacha (Jewish law) a father must **personally** be involved in the ceremony and cannot delegate its execution to a proxy. While Jewish law does allow for various religious obligations—such as tithing one's produce—through an agent, *Pidyon Haben*, is an exception to the rule and must be performed by the father directly.

Chasam Sofer, a noted nineteenth century rabbinic

authority, states that this rule is based on an explicit verse in this week's parsha (Exodus 13:13-15):

> "...you should redeem every firstborn person among your sons. It will come to pass if your son asks you in the future, saying, "What is this?' You shall say to him" 'With a mighty hand **G-d** took us out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to send us out, G-d slew every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of people and animals. Therefore, **I** offer to G-d all males that come out of the womb first, and **I** will redeem every one of my firstborn sons.'"

The concluding words: "**I** will redeem" is meant to underscore that the father himself must do the redeeming; he cannot delegate the responsibility to another, because G-d too "personally" was involved in the saving of the firstborn Israelites at the time of the Exodus.

Indeed, this theme of G-d's personal involvement in the Exodus is underscored in the Haggadah that is recited Passover night at the Seder. There we state that G-d did not delegate the responsibility to angels or any other messengers.

Moses Really Absent in the Haggadah

This premise—that G-d Himself was involved in the

Exodus and did not delegate responsibility to others—raises an obvious question: Is not the entire narrative of the Exodus punctuated with the role that Moses played as G-d's messenger? How can one state that G-d did it without a messenger, considering the numerous references in the Torah to how G-d tells Moses: "Go to Pharaoh" and similar pronouncements?

There are those who point to the absence of Moses' name in the Haggadah as proof that Moses' role ought not to be stressed. (In truth, Moses' name does appear once in the Haggadah in the verse, "And they believed in G-d and in Moses His servant." It is interesting to note the Midrash's comment on the comparison of G-d to Moses in this verse: "One who does not believe in Moses is tantamount to not believing in G-d!)

Maimonides certainly repudiates this notion that Moses' role out to be minimized. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides requires that when instructing the more mature son that we emphasize to him the role Moses played at that time. This is in stark contrast to the approach he advocates to the simple minded son. In other words, contrary to those who highlight the absence of Moses' name in the Haggadah as a sign that we ought to minimize Moses' role, Maimonides considers the highlighting of Moses to a sign of greater sophistication.

How then do we reconcile Moses' preeminent role in the

Exodus with the emphasis on G-d doing all by Himself?

Moses' Non-Role, Role

The answer to this question lies in a better understanding of Moses' role in this process.

When two parties, who are far apart, want to negotiate an agreement, there are two ways they can do so. They can hire an intermediary, an agent, who shuttles between the two parties, working out some compromise or accommodation that will be to their satisfaction. In all of these dealings, however, the two parties never really meet and form a close bond. And all that they accomplish in terms of their relationship is through the mediation of the agent. This system is known as an "intermediary who separates."

There is, however, a totally different type of mediation. For example, a *Shadchan*-matchmaker will bring two strangers together for the ultimate purpose of marriage. Initially, the two parties make no direct contact with one another, but through the initiative of the *Shadchan*, the two are introduced to each other and may subsequently become husband and wife.

Alternatively, there might be some friction between spouses or two close friends. A counselor or a mutual friend will mediate between them with the express goal of bringing

them back together so that they have a **direct** line of communication. This type of mediation is called an "intermediary that does not separate." On the contrary, his exclusive function is to bring about the most complete unity between the two sides that were heretofore totally separated.

This was the nature of Moses' role as an intermediary. His function was not to simply "represent" G-d, given the power of "attorney," to liberate the Jews and give them the Torah. His role was to bring G-d directly to the people, so that there was nothing that could possibly separate between the two: G-d and Israel enter into a cosmic marriage.

This was Moses' role as an intermediary. Hi function was to not simply "represent" G-d, given the power of "attorney" to liberate the Jews and give them the Torah. His rolewas to bring G-d directly to the people, so that there was nothing that could possibly separate between the two: G-d and Israel enter into a cosmic marriage.

Moses was able to accomplish this because Moses represented both sides. Moses, more than any other human being was attached to G-d, so much so that he is referred to in the book of Psalms as "*Ish Ho'elokim*-the Man of G-d." Moses' entire being was so transparent that he posed absolutely no barrier between G-d and himself. Yet, at the same time, his soul encompassed and was inextricably

bound with every Jew. Moses was therefore able to connect every Jew with G-d because Moses was intimately bound to both.

Therefore, the Mitzvah of redeeming the first born that parallels the Divine act of redeeming the Jewish people from exile, must reflect the lack of any interference, even of a positive nature, between the two "parties." The father must, therefore, personally redeem his son.

Moshiach: The Jewish View

What is said about Moses' role was true about every authentic Jewish spiritual leader. Their task was to serve as intermediaries that connect, rather than intermediaries that separate.

The same is certainly true about the Jewish belief in the Moshiach, a human leader whose role it is to be the *shadchan* that will bring G-d once more "down" to His people and redeem them from exile so that all of Israel enjoys a direct and unobstructed relationship with our Creator and Liberator.

The parallel between Moses and Moshiach is expressed by the Midrash's statement that "Moses was the first redeemer and Moses will be the final redeemer." This is understood

to mean that Moshiach will possess the soul and character of Moses that empowers him to liberate the Jewish people.

One of the characteristics they have in common is their humility. In order for them to channel the G-dly energy needed for liberation in particular, they need tobe so self-effacing that they serve as unobstructed conduits for G-d's light to reach us.

In other theological systems the concept of a Messiah is diametrically opposite that of Judaism. In these systems, the Messiah is an independent entity who actually stands in the way of our relationship with G-d. One can only get to G-d through their intermediary, which sets itself up as a demigod. It is therefore an intermediary that separates and obstructs. To worship an intermediary that sets itself up as a separate entity is a form of idolatry!

In Judaism, by stark contrast, Moshiach—as is true of every great Jewish leader in the past, beginning with Moses—removes all the barriers that may separate us from G-d. His role is to bring G-d's unity and exclusivity into the world, whereas in other belief systems the Messianic ideal actually imputes a composite nature to G-d. This is in total odds with Judaism's most important belief expressed in the Shema; it compromises G-d's oneness.

Moreover, the object of the messianic Age is to make the unity of G-d permeate the entire world. Moshiach, the

leader who ushers in that age, must certainly be the most self-effacing non-entity, who is instrumental in revealing that unity in the world.

ESSAY EIGHT

ENTERING THE CROCODILES DEN

Moses was expected to not only enter in to Pharaoh's palace, but to penetrate his inner sanctum, where he was in his most secure, physically and psychologically, space and taunt him by his very presence, thereby destroying his power.

Moses found this to be daunting.

For this new task, he was in need of G-d's assurance that He would accompany Moses.

Life is filled with surprise and confrontation. Like Moses, we find ourselves in situations where we come face to face with the greatest challenge of our life.

It is precisely at these times that we need and receive G-d's special support.

ESSAY EIGHT

ENTERING THE CROCODILES DEN

Moses was Mortified!

This week's *parsha* is named *Bo*, the key and defining word of the Torah portion that details the final steps that led to the Exodus from Egypt.

The opening phrase of this *parsha* reads: "And G-d spoke to Moses, '***Bo*-come** to Pharaoh."

The Zohar, the principle work of Kabbalah, raises the question: Why does it say "*Bo*-Come to Pharaoh" instead of the more common expression "*Lech*-Go to Pharaoh?"

The *Zohar's* answer is that in this command, G-d asked Moses to enter into the innermost chamber of Pharaoh's palace with the goal of confronting him in his most secure and fortified domain. Pharaoh, according to the Zohar, was not just a cruel and powerful monarch. Pharaoh was the ultimate force of evil in the world at that time.

And now was the time for Moses to wage "war" against Pharaoh, destroying the evil that was personified in him.

When Moses leaned of his new mission — to enter into the most private inner sanctum of Pharaoh and confront the force of evil on its home turf — the Zohar says that he was mortified.

The Zohar, thus explains, that G-d comforted Moses: "Don't worry, I will go with you." When G-d tells Moses "**Bo-come** to Pharaoh," He is actually saying: "Come **with Me** to Pharaoh." Moses will not have to confront Pharaoh on his own. He will be accompanied by G-d Himself.

One can still raise the question. Why did the Zohar provide this analysis as to the Torah's usage of the word "***Bo*-come** to Pharaoh," rather than "***Lech*-go** to Pharaoh," **here** in the beginning of this week's *parsha?* This is not the first time the Torah employed the word *"Bo."* In last week's parsha, the Torah used the word "*Bo*-come to Pharaoh" instead of ":*Lech*-go to Pharaoh" several times. Yet, the Zohar did not probe there why the Torah used the term "come" instead of "go."

Second, if Moses was so intimidated by Pharaoh at this point why was he not afraid of him previously? After all, Moses had confronted Pharaoh numerous times, as recorded throughout the last two Torah portions. Yet, only now did he require G-d's accompaniment and support. What is the difference?

Entering into a New Phase

Upon closer reflection, one can find a fundamental difference between G-d's command to Moses to "Come to Pharaoh" in the preceding Torah portion and the seemingly identical command "Come to Pharaoh" in this week's *parsha*.

Previously, G-d told Moses to come to Pharaoh for the express purpose of delivering a verbal message to him to "Let My people go, so that they may serve me." There was a distinct utilitarian purpose in his coming to Pharaoh, and it was not indented as a threat to Pharaoh's essential existence and power. As the *Ba'al Haturim* explains that If Pharaoh was in his palace, Moses would come to the palace. In those instances, the command to Moses was "**Come** to Pharaoh, meaning that he should come into his palace. If Pharaoh happened to have gone out to the banks of the Nile River, then Moses was told to "**Go** to Pharaoh.

The Rebbe explains that in this week's parsha, the Torah introduces a completely new phase in Moses' coming to Pharaoh:

To understand what this new phase was, we must note something unusual about G-d's statement to Moses to "come to Pharaoh." After these words, one would have expected the Torah to continue with the words, "and say to him," as the Torah has done before on numerous occasions.

Yet, in this one instance, when G-d tells Moses to "come to Pharaoh," it is not followed by the statement "and speak to him/ For that matter, it is not followed by any other instruction as to what Moses should do when he comes to Pharaoh!

Just Come

From this we can see that his purpose of coming to him was not to convey a message or make any specific demands of him. Moses' coming to Pharaoh was intended to be a confrontation with him for the express purpose of destroying his pride and confidence, as well as the forces of evil that he represented.

To do that he did not have to say anything or convey any message to Pharaoh. Just coming to him sufficed.

Moses was expected to not only enter in to Pharaoh's palace, but to penetrate his inner sanctum, where he was in his most secure, physically and psychologically, space and taunt him by his very presence, thereby destroying his power.

At this juncture—as opposed to earlier meetings with him—Moses was expected to enter into Pharaoh's psyche and penetrate into the very core of Pharaoh's power.

This new task, of entering the "den of the huge snake [or crocodile]," Moses found daunting. For this new task, he was in need of G-d's assurance that He would accompany Moses.

Dealing with Anxiety

Life is filled with surprise and confrontation. Like Moses, we find ourselves in situations where we come face to face with the greatest challenge of our life. At these times we feel we are ill prepared by all of our previous achievements to deal with the new and radically different challenge. And it is precisely at these times that we need and receive G-d's special support.

To address our anxiety we need to allow the comment of the Zohar on the words "come to Pharaoh" to reverberate in our minds and hearts. At precisely the time we experience the ultimate challenge of our lives, G-d provides us with unparalleled energy and succor.

This is true on an individual level and it is especially true on the collective level. When the Jewish people—and indeed the entire world—experience its greatest challenges, it is a sign that G-d comes along with us to defend, sustain and support us even, nay especially, in these perilous times.

The Darkness before the Dawn

Particularly now, in the momentous times when the world is poised to enter into the new phase of its history — the Age of Redemption that has been predicted by our prophets and sages thousands of years ago—the unprecedented forces of opposition that we confronted were predictable.

And while we enjoy the great gifts of freedom and prosperity with its attending opportunities, we cannot ignore the assimilation, secularism, hedonism, hostile nations and all the other isms and forces that are anathema to Judaism and the Jewish people, not to speak of the scourge of anti-Semitism, wars, terrorism and other forms of evil that have plagued and continue to plague the world in the last century.

We are living in a time that has thrust upon us the daunting task of entering into the caves and dens of unmitigated evil, not to engage it in conversation but to eradicate its very power. Even a Moses will feel intimidated and overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. How can we survive this test?

To be sure, the Jewish people have always known that the key to survival is their dedication to the study of Torah and the observance of its commandments. However, in this day and age, so many of our brothers and sisters have lost

touch with their roots and traditions. When we consider the degree to which Jewish values have been forgotten, neglected or challenged we might feel powerless to change.

If we were to meet "Pharaoh" on our turf we may feel confident that we can prevail. Even if we have to enter onto his turf, but we stand aloof from him, we can still see how we can contend with him. But when we are compelled to enter into Pharaoh's inner space, how can we possibly vanquish him?

From this week's Parsha, we can all take solace. When G-d gives us these unprecedented challenges, and expects us to confront the "Pharaoh" in his inner sanctum, G-d goes along with us. Indeed, the closer we are to the realization of G-d's plan for the world, a world of peace, harmony and universal spirituality, the bolder and more dangerous the job of preparing the world for that end becomes. In times like these, G-d not only gives us the strength to cope, He "comes along with us," every step of the way, until we finally experience the full exodus from exile.

ESSAY NINE

FINALLY FREE

According to one authority we will always have to express our gratitude to G-d for the Exodus from Egypt even in the Messianic Age, despite the fact that the miracle of the Redemption will dwarf the miracle of the Exodus.

Without freedom we acquired at the Exodus we could never have attained anything.

We would not have been able receive the Torah. And if not for the original experience of the Exodus that continued for thousands of years, we could never reach the Messianic Age.

Chassidic thought teaches us that the Exodus from Egypt contained the potential energy for all subsequent liberations.

ESSAY NINE

FINALLY FREE

Our Obsession

Remembering the Exodus is one of the Commandments mentioned in this week's Parsha. We are obligated to remember the Exodus every day and every night. Many of the rituals of Judaism — from the Passover Seder to the laws against usury and false weights and measures are associated with the Exodus, in one form or another. So important was the Exodus that the Ten Commandments begin with G-d "introducing" Himself as "I am the One who took the Jewish People out of the land of Egypt, from the House of Bondage."

This obsession with the Exodus is summed up succinctly in the words of the Mishnah (also cited in the Haggadah): "in each and every generation, one must view himself as if he left Egypt."

Why?

Granted that freedom from slavery is a major part of our history; granted, without freedom there would not be a

Jewish nation, but why the obsession with the Exodus? To remember the Exodus one night a year would make sense, but why are we obligated to remember the Exodus each and every day and night? Why do we need so many tangible reminders of this historical event?

Our Sages were anticipating this question when they stated that "In each and every generation one must view himself as if he just left Egypt." The Exodus is not an event of the past, but an ongoing process.

Indeed, the Alter Rebbe in his classic work, the Tanya, adds the words, "In each and every day" to the Mishnah's reference to each and every generation. In addition, the Tanya adds the word "today." One mus see the process of the Exodus on a daily basis.

As was explained in many of these essays, the word *Mitzraim*, Hebrew for Egypt actually connotes a state of confinement, physical or spiritual.

All periods of exile, our Sages stated, were named after the Egyptian/Mitzraim exile. All periods and forms of exile share the characteristic of constraints that have been imposed on us, either form tyrannical forces or from the seductive forces of assimilation. Some forms of exile were imposed externally and some are actually induced from within. The common denominator is that Mitzraim/exile forces inhibit our spiritual energy, crush our spirits, and

make us vulnerable to all that which is negative.

But one does not have to be in the depths of despair to appreciate the need to get out of Mitzraim. No matter how much we might have progressed, there is still something that confines, inhibits or limits us if only we are expected to climb even higher. What was perhaps acceptable today will not be enough tomorrow. The psychological pressures that tell us that we can rest on our laurels is no less a form of Mitzraim than all the others.

Going out of *Mitzraim* then is the process of removing all the impediments to our spiritual progress no matter how high we have climbed and no matter how much we have achieved.

As such, our remembrance of the Exodus is not simply remembering an event of the past, but it is an ongoing process.

When we realize that the Exodus is a current and continuing event, it makes the remembrance of it far more meaningful and alive.

Are We just Treading Water?

This analysis, however, can also raise a rather troubling question, which, if not answered can lead to a sense of frustration and even depression.

The question is, do we ever realize our goal of true and complete freedom? Do we have to anticipate forever dedicating our lives to fighting the obstacles? Isn't it depressing to be in a constant struggle to be free? Would anyone be happy to fight an incessant war against those who would want to deny our freedom knowing that the effort will prove futile?

To preserve our sanity, don't we have to finally be free, once and for all, so we can focus on the positive areas of growth and not be fixated on defending our liberty?

This question is actually what our prayers for the Final Redemption and the coming of the Moshiach are all about. Why do we ask for the Messianic Age? There are many good answers to this question. However, one good reason is that it will finally allow our quest for true freedom to be fulfilled. At that juncture we will be able to focus our attention on the purely positive elements of life that are the source of true joy and satisfaction.

Growth through Adversity is *Not* the Goal

And while we certainly have developed the ability to grow by virtue of the adversity and threats to freedom that we had to overcome, the ultimate Redemption is one that will show us how we can grow without adversity.

Unfortunately, we have so conditioned ourselves to learn

how to thrive on adversity; we tend to forget that the goal is actually the realization of a victory over evil and pain.

Remembering the Exodus in the Messianic Age: Two Views

With this introduction we can understand the dispute between two sages in the Mishnah as to whether we will continue to mention the Exodus from Egypt in the future Messianic Era.

According to one authority (Berachos, end of Chapter one, cited in the Passover Haggadah), we will always have to express our gratitude to G-d for the Exodus from Egypt even in the Messianic Age, despite the fact that the miracle of the Redemption will dwarf the miracle of the Exodus.

The reason for this is that without freedom we acquired at the Exodus we could never have attained anything. We would not have been able receive the Torah. And if not for the original experience of the Exodus that continued for thousands of years, we could never reach the Messianic Age.

Chassidic thought teaches us that the Exodus from Egypt contained the potential energy for all subsequent liberations.

Other Sages (Ben Zoma), however, disagree and maintain that in the future we will no longer mention the Exodus

from Egypt.

The second view needs to be understood. Why wouldn't we remember the Exodus from Egypt in the future? Wasn't it the process that established us as a nation? Shouldn't we give credit where credit is due? Isn't this comparable to the person who never forgets his first job, because it was the key to all future successes?

In light of our earlier discussion we can understand why t will no longer be necessary and advisable to focus on the past experiences of freedom because we will have entered into a totally new dimension of existence, one in which positive energy does not have to be generated from the challenge of coping with adversity.

To best appreciate the beauty of growth within the realm of positive energy itself it behooves us to minimize our preoccupation with the negative experiences of the past, even as they relate to them as the catalysts for growth.

This does not mean that in the future Messianic Era we will not know of the suffering of the past and how G-d delivered us from them. That would be impossible because these painful memories are recorded in the Torah for posterity. It is the emphasis on these negative events—even how they translate into positive energy—that will become obsolescent.

ESSAY TEN

TOP PRIORITY

Whenever we succeed in extricating one Jew from the state of alienation from G-d, and bring him closer to Judaism, we have, in effect, liberated an entire world.

Our sages tell us that "one who saves but one person is as if he had saved an entire universe."

ESSAY TEN

TOP PRIORITY

Why not Send an Angel

"I" and not an angel, "I" and not a messenger, but the Holy One, Blessed is He," was the one to bring the tenth plague and liberate the Jews from Egypt.

These words, taken from the *Haggadah,* describe the unique nature of G-d's involvement in the Tenth Plague and in the subsequent Exodus from Egypt.

The emphasis on G-d's exclusive role in the Exodus 1 so pronounced that there some commentaries who suggest that this is the reason for Moses' name/role not highlighted in the Passover Haggadah. The absence of Moses underscores the theme of G-d as the exclusive force in the Exodus.

Every detail of the Torah was recorded not to simply inform us about events of the past. The Torah is not a history book, but a Divine blueprint for our lives. Every detail and nuance recorded in the Torah must serve as a lesson for us in our daily lives.

What, we may ask, is the lesson we are to derive from G-d's direct involvement in the exodus from Egypt?

In truth, the emphasis on G-d doing it directly also needs clarification. Why was it so crucial that He did not delegate the task of liberating the Jews to an angel?

If G-d had chosen to liberate the Jews from Egypt through one of his angels, would that have diminished the significance of the Exodus? After all, an angel is no more than G-d's messenger and instrument to carry out His will. Even if G-d had chosen to liberate them by way of an angel, the Exodus would still have been attributed to G-d as the one who sent the angel to do the job. Why begrudge the angle its role as the instrument of G-d?

Emulating G-d

One of the principles of Judaism is the need to emulate G-d, *imitatio dei*. Whatever the Torah tells us about G-d is actually a challenge for us to implement G-d's behavior in our own lives. "G-d visited the sick, so we have an obligation to visit the sick," says the Talmud. By emulating G-d, we become G-dly and are able to express our own G-dly nature.

But, G-d is also a Creator. How do **we** create a universe? Isn't creation something that only an omnipotent G-d can do?

The answer, provided by our Sages, is that G-d has given us the opportunity to be His partner in creation. By working six days a week to change the world and then rest on the Shabbos and proclaim that G-d is the Creator, "we become partners to G-d in the act of Creation."

How do we become Liberators

But, isn't G-d also a liberator? How do we liberate the Jewish people from exile? How do we bring about Redemption for the entire world? Isn't that something only an omnipotent G-d can do? How can we be asked to emulate G-d and become liberators?

The answer is that whenever we succeed in extricating one Jew from the state of alienation from G-d, and bring him closer to Judaism, we have, in effect, liberated an entire world. Our sages tell us that "one who saves but one person is as if he had saved an entire universe."

Two Attitudes in the Process of Liberation

However, there can be two approaches to the effort at liberating the individual. One can put aside other interests and projects—as important as they be help "liberate" another Jew from his state of spiritual alienation.

However, there are those who will invest their strongest

efforts and best talents for the attainment of self-perfection through Torah study and the observance of Mitzvos. Liberating others, some might feel, can take a back seat to their efforts in the realm of personal development. Much less talent, energy and time could suffice in the pursuit of liberating others. A person with this mindset would readily delegate this responsibility to others so that they can be free to pursue the path of self-development.

To dispel this notion that somehow the process of liberation is less important than one's self-development, the Torah tells us that G-d was **directly** involved in the process of the exodus from Egypt. He did not "delegate" the responsibility to angels, because, G-d considers the liberation of the Jewish people from spiritual and physical confinement as His highest priority. It was too important to put it in the hands of even His most trusted servants—the angels.

We too, must emulate G-d and invest our best and most in reaching "in" to every Jew to uncover their G-dly spirit. This process of liberation cannot be delegated to others and cannot be relegated to a lower level of priority.

Indeed, the liberation of the individual is an integral part of the process of the liberation of the entire Jewish people and the entire world. What can be more important than liberating the whole world? And while it is true that every Mitzvah we perform gets us closer to the Redemption—the

direct approach towards this goal, however, is to endeavor to help another experience a personal liberation.

G-d rewards us measure for measure. G-d will certainly hasten the ultimate liberation of all the Jewish people—and the entire world—from this exile, with the imminent coming of Moshiach!

ESSAY ELEVEN

SEEING THE LIGHT

As a preparation for the revelation of the Exodus and the Sinai experience, G-d gave the Jews a foretaste of the Divine light that they would experience on the last night in Egypt and beyond.

But this light was so powerful that it overwhelmed the depraved Egyptians and temporarily blinded them.

The plague of darkness showed them that there are aspects of G-d's light that are so great — they are (at least temporarily) — totally beyond their grasp.

The ninth plague showed the Egyptians that there was a level of G-dliness that left them totally in the dark.

ESSAY ELEVEN

SEEING THE LIGHT

The "Sandwiched" Plague

Of all the Ten Plagues that G-d brought upon the Egyptians, the plague of darkness is clearly the most enigmatic. Besides the obvious fright that overcame the Egyptians, the plague of darkness did not seem to have the same effect of all the other plagues.

All the other plagues either destroyed Egyptian resources (blood destroyed the Nile their water supply; pestilence killed their livestock and people; locusts destroyed most of their food supply) that were crucial to life, or caused bodily harm (frogs, lice, mixture of wild animals, boils, plague of the first born).

Furthermore, as the plagues progressed the harm that was caused by them also seemed to increase. (The last two plagues: hail and locusts were life threatening as was the last plague of the firstborn). "Sandwiched" in between these deadly plagues was the one of darkness that appeared to have been the least harmful of all.

What purpose was served by the plague of darkness?

Darkness the Ultimate form of Enlightenment

One explanation that will shed light (pun intended) on the plague of darkness views this plague as the ultimate enlightening experience and was therefore an integral part of the process of the Exodus from Egypt.

There are two forms and sources of darkness. One that derives from the absence of light. The other comes from excessive generation of light. When a very bright light is shined into someone's eyes, he can become blinded. Looking directly into the sun — the most powerful light source to reach the Earth – can become the most darkening experience. (It is also interesting to note that the Talmud calls a blind person a "*sagi nahor*." literally, one who has [too] **much light**.)

It can therefore be suggested that the plague of darkness was not caused by an absence of light, but by an abundance of it. And as will be explained, this served to underscore the very purpose of the Exodus.

A Foretaste of the Light of Sinai

In asking Pharaoh to let the Jews out of Egypt, Moses underscored the fact that the purpose of the Exodus would

be to serve G-d. G-d himself said the same thing to Moses at the Burning Bush when He delegated the responsibility to redeem the Jews to him.

Chassidic thought describes the Exodus as much more than just an escape to freedom from physical oppression – it was an intensely spiritual revelation that was a precursor to the even greater revelation of G-d that would happen at Mount Sinai.

As a preparation for the revelation of the Exodus and the Sinai experience, G-d gave the Jews a foretaste of the Divine light that they would experience on the last night in Egypt and beyond. But this light was so powerful that it overwhelmed the depraved Egyptians and temporarily blinded them.

We can now appreciate the purpose of the ninth plague. As we mentioned last week, in addition to punishing the Egyptians, the plagues were meant to educate them. Each plague introduced them to another of G-d's attributes.

The plague of darkness showed them that there are aspects of G-d's light that are so great — they are (at least temporarily) — totally beyond their grasp.

In a manner of speaking, the ninth plague showed the Egyptians that there was a level of G-dliness that left them totally in the dark.

A Light to the Nations

At the same time, they learned that the Jewish nation **was** able to accept this G-dly revelation and grow with it. They learned, during the plague of darkness, that G-d was forming a nation that would be receptive to G-d's light, so that they can serve as a "light unto the nations" - introduce this light to the rest of the world.

Accordingly, it taught the nations of the world that by helping the Jewish people to absorb this light — by way of Torah study and fulfillment of its precepts — they will also acquire the ability to absorb this powerful G-dly light.

The Light of the Future

One of the features of the Messianic Age is the intensity of the light that we will experience. One of its features, the Talmud tells us, is that the "righteous will bask in it and the wicked will be judged by it."

It maybe suggested that the light to be introduced in the Messianic Age is the same light that was generated during the plague of darkness, with two salient differences.

First, in the future the light will become a permanent fixture and not just for a few days as in the plague of darkness.

Second, in the future, the entire world (with the exception

of the extremely and incorrigible wicked) will be capable of absorbing it. Instead of serving as a paralyzing force as in the plague of darkness, it will be a liberating force for all of humanity. In the words of the prophet:

"**All the nations** shall walk in Your light."

At that time no one will be left in the dark.

ESSAY TWELVE

ALL DRESSED UP AND READY TO GO

All the reasons that were given for our stay in exile have all since expired.

Why has G-d kept us here anyhow?

One answer: G-d wants us to enter into the Messianic period "fully and ornately dressed."

Rather than just thrust us into a new world of unadulterated goodness and holiness, unprepared, He gives us numerous opportunities to "dress" ourselves, with yet another mitzvah.

Every mitzvah we do now will make us more comfortable with and receptive to the G-dly light that will shine in the Messianic Age.

ESSAY TWELVE

ALL DRESSED UP AND READY TO GO

Blood, Sweat and Tears

The Jewish people have already been told that they will be liberated from Egypt. Nine of the ten plagues have already been dealt. The Egyptian people are at their wit's end.

At this point, this week's Torah portion continues, G-d tells Moses to command the Jewish people to take a lamb and tie it to their beds on the tenth of the month. They were to keep them there, ready for the fourteenth day of the month when they will sacrifice the lamb to G-d.

In addition, they were told that only those who were circumcised would be permitted to partake of the Paschal Lamb offering.

These two Mitzvos – the Passover lamb sacrifice and circumcision – our sages tell us were given to the Jewish people at precisely this time – right before their exodus – for a good reason.

Rashi quotes the Talmudic sage, Rabbi Matya ben Charash who puts it this way:

> "..The time had come for Me to keep My oath that I had made to the patriarchs, that I will redeem their children. Alas, they did not have any Mitzvos in their hands with which to be preoccupied, so that they may be redeemed, as it says, 'And you were naked and bare [of Mitzvos].' He, therefore, gave them then two precepts, the blood of the Paschal sacrifice and the blood of circumcision."

The long arduous exile that was punctuated with sweat and tears, was to culminate with blood; the blood of the Paschal sacrifice and the blood of circumcision.

The question may be asked. There are so many Mitzvos G-d could have given them. Why did He choose these two specifically?

Secondly, why did He have to give them two Mitzvos? Even if they would have observed one mitzvah they would no longer have been considered "naked," from the spiritual point of view. Could not one Mitzvah be considered a valid garment?

Removal of Two Impediments to Redemption

The Jewish people in Egypt were lacing two distinct qualities. They were firstly lacking in positive actions and

were therefore ill prepared for the pro-active form of service to G-d that Sinai would have demanded of them.

Secondly, there was a deficiency in their distancing themselves from evil. Had they not altered this state of affairs, they would have then left Egypt with their evil and could not have survived as a Jewish people, whose values conform to the Torah.

To remove the two impediments to the exodus, there was therefore a need for two distinct precepts. The covenant of circumcision is the most dramatic way one shows one's commitment to G-d and activates one's reservoir of positive energy.

Circumcision is the only Mitzvah that actually leaves its imprint on the person permanently. Consequently, circumcision exemplifies the Jew's unqualified and unconditional devotion to doing that which G-d wants, at all times.

The blood of the Paschal sacrifice, conversely, represented the repudiation of the negative. It was well known that the Egyptians worshipped the lamb as a g-d. By slaughtering the lamb and sprinkling its blood, thus, one demonstrated his utter abhorrence for and absolute rejection of evil.

Getting Dressed for the Occasion

The Torah tells us (and our sages reinforced the belief) that the pre-Messianic times in which we are situated now parallel the pre-Exodus period.

All the reasons that were given for our stay in exile have all since expired. Why has G-d kept us here anyhow?

One answer given is that G-d wants us to enter into the Messianic period "fully and ornately dressed." Rather than just thrust us into a new world of unadulterated goodness and holiness, unprepared, He gives us numerous opportunities to "dress" ourselves, with yet another mitzvah. Every mitzvah we do now will make us more comfortable with and receptive to the G-dly light that will shine in the Messianic Age.

However, the fact that we are fully dressed in the spiritual sense of the word does not suffice. We have an obligation to see to it that not one Jew remains in an unprepared state.

One of the Biblical obligations is: "If you see someone naked, you shall cover him." (Isaiah 58:7). This obligation to clothe the naked is to be understood figuratively just as it is to be interpreted literally. If someone is bereft of Mitzvos-Garments, it is our obligation to provide it for them. This is especially true in the present Messianic Era, when every garment we give to others makes u that much

more ready for the final Redemption.

And if we have specialized and excelled in one category of Mitzvos, it may not suffice. The A-mighty might want u to be fully dressed to cover up all our inadequacies.

Moreover, every new Mitzvah to which we apply ourselves and every Mitzvah we provide for another Jew might be the final mitzvah that was needed for the A-mighty to say, "*s'iz shoin genug-it is already enough."* There is no need to keep you here longer because every Jew had done a mitzvah, and therefore, every Jew is adequately dressed for the coming of Moshiach.

(This essay is based on the Rebbe's discourse in Likkutei Sichos, volume 16, Parshas Bo.)

ESSAY THIRTEEN

THE FIRST MITZVAH

Judaism is not about religion.

It is about transforming the world; making every year, month, week, day, hour, minute and second count.

Today is not just today. It is the accumulation of sanctified segments of time that represent a powerful surge of unprecedented energy.

The weekdays that we sanctify with our Mitzvos make the Shabbos that much more meaningful and holy—in addition to the natural sanctity the Shabbos possesses.

And all of the sanctified "weekdays" of our past come together to create the ultimate Sabbath of existence—the era of Moshiach.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

THE FIRST MITZVAH

Faith, Procreation and Establishing the Calendar

What was the first commandment, the Jewish people were given as a nation?

Most people would answer by citing the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the L-rd your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt from the House of Bondage." Indeed, Maimonides lists this commandment to believe and know G-d as his first in his Book of Commandments and in his Mishneh Torah.

Others might have answered that the first commandment was to "be fruitful and multiply," for it is the first commandment mentioned in the Torah. Indeed, the medieval classic work on the 613 Mitzvos known as the Chinuch, lists this commandment as the very first.

Rashi, in his opening commentary on the Torah says that the first Mitzvah the Jews were given as a people, is one that appears in this week's Torah portion:

"This month is to you the head of all the months."

From this verse we derive the mitzvah for the Jewish people, through the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Court), to convene every month and declare when the new month should begin.

In other words, the first Mitzvah the Jewish people were given was to set up a system of determining the months and the Jewish Holidays.

One may raise the obvious question: why was this Mitzvah the first one the Jewish people were introduced to as a nation. What is so special about this mitzvah?

We can appreciate why Maimonides considers the belief in and knowledge of G-d as the first commandment because it **was** the first commandment they heard directly from G-d when He spoke – the one and only time in history – to the entire Jewish people.

Furthermore, the mitzvah to believe and know G-d is the foundation of all the other commandments. If one does not accept the existence of a G-d, the Commander of the Mitzvos, there is no basis for any of the other commandments. Hence, as Maimonides himself notes, this mitzvah is listed first because it is the most fundamental of all.

We can also appreciate why the *Chinuch* lists the obligation of procreation as the first commandment. Not only is it literally the first Mitzvah that appears in the Torah, but, moreover, observance of this mitzvah facilitates the

observance of all others. For Judaism to survive, there must be a Jewish people.

Indeed, the Chinuch seems to be justifying the fact that this is the Torah's very first Mitzvah by stating:

> "This great Mitzvah through which all the other Mitzvos are performed, for they were given to humans and not to angels."

In other words, without this Mitzvah there can be no humanity; and without humanity there is no purpose in having these commandments, since the only other intelligent beings are angels and they don't need the Torah.

This explains (see notes of Rabbi Chavel on Chinuch there) why the general prohibition of selling a Torah scroll, even for the sake of observing a Mitzvah, does not apply to the Mitzvah of marriage. The only other exception is Torah study. Now, the exception made for Torah study is understandable. What use is a Torah scroll of one cannot afford to study the Torah? But, what reason is there for selling a Torah scroll for the sake of marriage? Why would marriage—more than any other Mitzvah—override the prohibition of selling a Torah scroll?

The rationale for marriage is that one cannot perpetuate the Torah without the introduction of new life. Of what avail is a Torah scroll if there is no one to pass it on to in the next generation? Hence selling a Torah scroll for the sakeof

marriage—as is the case with selling it for the sake of Torah study—actually facilitates Torah study and observance of its precepts.

To summarize the question:

Belief in G-d is the foundation of Judaism. Propagating the species preserves the viability of Judaism. But what overarching theme is conveyed by the Mitzvah of establishing the calendar?

As we shall see, the establishment of a Jewish calendar by the Jewish people, epitomizes Judaism's philosophy and purpose.

Sanctifying Time: Foundation of the Mitzvos

When G-d gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai, His objective was to provide us with a means to change the world and transform it into a G-dly world. Every time we do a mitzvah that involves a physical object, we instill holiness into that object as well as into ourselves.

For example: When a Jew puts on Tefillin, for example, the leather boxes, the parchment upon which the scrolls contained within the Tefillin are written, and the arm and head of the person who wears them, all become holy. The same is true of giving tzedakah, lighting a Shabbos candle et al.

Now, while this concept applies to all Mitzvos, it is most vividly expressed in this first Mitzvah of establishing the calendar.

When the Rabbinical court would declare the New Month (Rosh Chodesh) they were actually transforming time itself. By declaring the new month, they transformed an ordinary weekday into a holy day (Rosh Chodesh). Indeed the very words the Jewish court used to sanctify the New Moon was: "*mekudash* (it is sanctified"). Once Rosh Chodesh was determined, all Jewish Holy Days which follow the lunar calendar could be scheduled. In other words, it were the Jewish people, through their Sanhedrin, that were responsible for the very establishment of the Holy Days.

By giving the Jewish people the mitzvah of establishing the calendar first, the Torah wished to underscore that the whole purpose of Judaism is to bring holiness into the mundane.

Moreover, this process of making the world holy begins with the transformation of time. When we make time holy, through the observance of Rosh Chodesh and Jewish Holidays, we have the capacity to also bring holiness into space, since time and space are inextricably bound, as Maimonides writes. When time is seen as something that has intrinsic value, it instills value into everything else. If we can affect something as elusive as time, we can certainly affect our own bodies and the world around us.

We have the Power to Change the World

And most importantly, perhaps, the lesson that we can derive from placing the establishment of the Jewish calendar by the courts as the first Mitzvah is that we have the power to change the world. Knowing this at the outset is crucial because it set the tone for all the other Mitzvos that involve refining and changing the world.

'Contrary to other philosophies that minimize our role in effecting drastic changes in the world, Judaism believes, unequivocally, that G-d gave us mere mortals the ability ad responsibility to make the world a good and holy place. This process begins by valuing each and every day, instilling time itself with meaning, purpose and holiness.

Moshiach's Coming Imminent

With this premise that Judaism is about endowing time with meaning and sanctity, we can gain some insight into the belief in the coming of Moshiach and into the belief in the imminence of his coming.

There are those who cannot accept the possibility of the coming of Moshiach and the ultimate Redemption. They find it still harder to imagine that Moshiach's coming is imminent. How can the world change so drastically and precipitously? Certainly, they muse, it will have to take

centuries, perhaps even millennia for it to occur if it can occur at all.

The answer to their "challenge" lies in the uniqueness of Judaism. It is not about religion. It is about transforming the world; making every year, month, week, day, hour, minute and second count. Today is therefore not just today. It is the accumulation of sanctified segments of time that represent a powerful surge of unprecedented energy. And just as the weekdays that we sanctify with our Mitzvos make the Shabbos that much more meaningful and holy—in addition to the natural sanctity the Shabbos possesses—all of the sanctified "weekdays" of our past come together to create the ultimate Sabbath of existence—the era of Moshiach.

And through our cumulative efforts at transforming the world, the world will finally realize the Divine purpose for which it was created - to become G-d's dwelling place. This ultimate goal is reflected in the first Mitzvah of bringing holiness into time, the ultimate result of which is the realization of a time when even the weekdays will be visibly and palpably holy.

Three Firsts: Foundation, Means and Objective

Let us return to the other two "firsts": According to Maimonides the first and most fundamental Mitzvah is belief in G-d. According to the Chinuch it is the Mitzvah to

procreate. And the third "first," according to Rashi is the establishment of a system for reckoning time.

Each of these pivotal Mitzvos focuses on a different aspect of Judaism:

Belief in G-d is the foundation of all of Judaism.

Procreation is the means through which all of Judaism is communicated and implemented.

The establishment of the calendar, however, epitomizes Judaism's thrust and objective—for us to bring G-dly meaning to the entire world; to make the world a dwelling place for G-d and the transformation of all time into holy days.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

FROM MOSES TO MOSES...

The Jewish people were blessed with a leader of monumental proportions. His name was Moses.

In the more recent past we were blessed with another Moses , Moses Maimonides, known in his day as Rabeinu Moshe and for all of eternity as Rambam (An acrostic for Rabeinu Moshe Ben Maimon).

Indeed, the parallel between these two great leaders is captured by the epitaph engraved on his tombstone: "From Moses to Moses, none has arisen like Moses."

ESSAY FOURTEEN

FROM MOSES TO MOSES...

Moshe Rabeinu of Rabeinu Moshe

Moses, or, as he is known among Jews, Moshe Rabeinu, was G-d's special messenger to the Jews, their liberator and lawgiver. In addition he was also G-d's special messenger to Pharaoh and the Egyptian people before whom he performed great wonders. Among all Jewish leaders, Moshe Rabeinu stands out as the most unique. Indeed, the entire Torah has been referred to—in Biblical literature—as "Toras Moshe-the Torah of Moses!"

In the more recent past, the Jewish people were again blessed with a leader of monumental proportions. His name was also Moses, Moses Maimonides, known in his day as Rabeinu Moshe and for all of eternity as Rambam (An acrostic for Rabeinu Moshe Ben Maimon). Indeed, the parallel between these two great leaders is captured by the epitaph engraved on his tombstone: "From Moses to Moses, none has arisen like Moses."

As the first Moses—who, notwithstanding his many achievements and talents, is known primarily as the one who transmitted the Torah to the Jewish people—Maimonides to, while famous for his philosophical, medicak and astronomical prowess, is primarily renowned for his contribution to the teaching of Torah. Maimonides' Magnum Opus, the Mishneh Torah, is the most comprehensive restatement of the Torah that has even been penned. Its name, Mishneh Torah, literally "the restatement of the Torah" reflects the symbiotic relationship it enjoys with Toras Moshe, the teachings of the first Moshe.

Where is Maimonides Hinted in the Torah?

There is a major principle of Torah that everything that is in existence can be found in the Torah, if only in a hinted form. This principle is based on the Midrashic statement that the Torah is G-d's blueprint for creation. It stands to reason that if something is part of creation, then it must be found, albeit in blueprint form, in the Torah.

This assertion is based on the Talmud that asks where is Mordechai, Esther and even Haman hinted in the Torah? The Talmud then proceeds to find their names mentioned, albeit in a somewhat altered form, in the Torah.

(Interestingly, many of Judaism's greatest Sages and leaders are hinted in the very first word of the Torah: "Bereishis-In the beginning." This word contains the letters that form the initials of rabbis such as: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Rav Ashi, Rashi, Rashba, Rosh, Rivash, Rabbi Yisroel Ba'al She Tov, Rabbi Shneur ben Sterna (the first Chabad Rebbe), Rabbi Sholom ben Rivka (the fifth Rebbe of Chabad), Rabbi Yosef ben Sholom (the Previous Rebbe, sixth leader of Chabad) and dozens more.)

It follows then, that there will be some prophetic reference to this great personage. The Rambam, in the Torah as well.

Indeed, there are some who found this allusion in this week's Torah portion Bo. Right before the tenth and last plague, G-d informs Moses that the reason Pharaoh will not listen to Moses' and Aaron's warning to him is "in order that My wonders will be multiplied in the Land of Egypt."

The four Hebrew words that translate "My wonders will be multiplied in the Land of Egypt" are: ***Revos Mofsai B'eretz Mitzraim***, the initials of which is Rambam!

And, indeed, Rambam did perform great wonders in the medical as well as in the religious sense, Moreover, he did them primarily in the Land of Egypt. Furthermore, much of his medical marvels were demonstrated when he served the Sultan Saladin and his successor – before the king of Egypt!

But, there is more to the parallel than just this. It has been demonstrated that even the name of Rambam's Magnum Opus – Mishneh Torah – can be found hinted in this section of the Torah. In a "code" that has received much attention recently, one can find the two words Mishneh Torah coded into the Biblical text in close proximity to the words that contain Rambam's initials. When we take the letter mem that occurs in the name of Moses (appearing in the foregoing verse that alluded to the great wonders he performed in the land of Egypt) and we skip 50 letters, we will find the letter shin. By following this pattern of skipping 50 letters, we ultimately find the name Mishneh Torah spelled out!

(The number 50 is laden with meaning in Judaism. It encapsulates the nature of Torah that was given 50 days after the Jewish people's departure from Egypt. 50 is one more than 7x7. Kabbalah explains that the number 50 transcends the order of nature represented by the number 7, as in 7 days of the week. This is what Torah is all about; transcendent Divine wisdom.)

Happy Birthday Maimonides

Even more startling is the fact that in this very section of the parsha, reference is made to the afternoon of the fourteenth day of Nissan, at which time the Israelites were

to slaughter the Paschal lamb, the idol of Egypt. It is incredible that this time—the afternoon of the 14th day of Nissan happens to be Rambam's precise time of birth!

The fact that Maimonides' birthday occurred precisely at the time of the offering of the Paschal lamb is also not a coincidence. The slaughtering and offering of the lamb was the Jewish people's way of repudiating the idolatrous practice of the Egyptians. Maimonides devoted much of his life and writings to dispel many idolatrous beliefs and superstitions. In his Guide for the Perplexed Maimonides demonstrates how many of the 613 commandments were directed against various forms of idolatry.

Mainonides: The Ultimate Iconoclast

If we are discussing hints, it has also been pointed out that the phrase "Moshe Rabeinu, or, the inverted form "Rabeinu Moshe" (used for the first Moses and the latter Moses, respectively), add up numerically to 613! The number 613, of course, represents the number of Mitzvos mentioned in the Torah. It is fascinating that Maimonides based his work, the Mishneh Torah on his enumeration of the 613 commandments. No less than four times does Maimonides provide us with a list of these 613 commandments!

As we see here, the essence of both Moses and Moses Maimonides was Torah in its most complete and

comprehensive form—all of the 613 commandments. For it was their mission to impart to us the totality of Judaism; enabling us to implement it within our lives and thereby pave the way for Redemption.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

GETTING OUT OF THE BLACK HOLE!

The plague of darkness was not just the absence of light but a substantive and palpable form of darkness.

There are times in our lives that we may be missing some light; it is a temporary condition that can be remedied by the study of a little bit of Torah, a small gesture of kindness, participation in a Holiday celebration etc., for a little bit of light can dispel much darkness.

But, when one is in Mitzraim, when one's mindset and emotions are in a "straight jacket," the darkness becomes palpable.

This darkness is analogous to the black hole phenomenon that doesn't allow any light to exist or escape; it swallows all of the light.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

GETTING OUT OF THE BLACK HOLE!

The Anatomy of a Plague

One of the plagues that we read about in this week's parsha is the plague of darkness. It was obviously intended to punish the Egyptians as were the other plagues. But, in addition to the punishment aspect of these plagues, they also convey a spiritual and moral message; a message that is relevant to us in this day and age.

The plague of darkness is described in the Torah thus:

> "G-d said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards the heavens, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt. And the darkness will be one that can be felt. Moses stretched out his hand toward the heaven, and there was thick darkness over the entire and of Egypt for three days. No person could see his brother, nor could any person rise from his place for three days. However, the children of Israel had light in all their homes.'"

According to Rashi and others the plague of darkness lasted for two sets of three days. In the first three days they could not see one another; in the second set of three days they could not rise from their place.

In summary the Torah makes several salient points about the plague of darkness:

(a) It was a palpable form of darkness

(b) They could not see each other

(c) No one could rise

(d) It lasted for two sets of three days

How can we understand this plague in the context of our own spiritual lives? And how do all the above details fit into the message the Torah imparted to us in the description of this plague?

Spiritual Darkness and Insensitivty

The obvious lesson from the plague of darkness is that when one is in Egypt, which in Hebrew (Mitzraim) means confined and constrained, they become blind and desensitized towards others as well. We are in the confined and constrained atmosphere of Mitzraim when we put limits on our own moral and spiritual life. When we stifle our soul's desire to grow and break out of its shell

and cocoon we suffer from the plague of darkness that affects our relationships with others as well.

We cannot compartmentalize our lives and separate our spiritual progress from our attitude towards others. Inertia in the realm of spirituality will ultimately take its toll on our relationships as well. A relationship, by definition, is the ability to go beyond ourselves and reach out to others. How can a person who is so constrained and self-absorbed appreciate the value of connecting and giving to another?

This is what the Torah means when it says,

> "And there was thick darkness over the entire and of Egypt for three days. No person could see his brother."

Each person in the spiritually dark and G-dly challenged state of Mitzraim lives for himself and cannot see his fellow; even his own brother.

When one believes they are limited and confined in terms of spiritual development it causes them to remain in the dark even with respect to interpersonal relationships. When a person imposes artificial limits on their potential it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and they will be engulfed in darkness. The more we aspire to more spirituality and the more liberated our souls, the more comfortable we will be with other people. Because the Egyptians were so constrained they couldn't even see one another.

Palpable Darkness

But the plague of darkness was worse than just being in the dark. The darkness is described by the Torah as one that can be touched and felt. The implication is that this darkness was not just the absence of light but a substantive and palpable form of darkness.

In terms of our spiritual lives this suggests that there are two forms of insensitivity towards others. There are times in our lives that we may be missing some light; it is a temporary condition that can be remedied by the study of a little bit of Torah, a small gesture of kindness, participation in a Holiday celebration etc., for a little bit of light can dispel much darkness.

But, when one is in Mitzraim, when one's mindset and emotions are in a "straight jacket," the darkness becomes palpable. This darkness is analogous to the black hole phenomenon that doesn't allow any light to exist or escape; it swallows all of the light.

The Torah continues to describe this phenomenon and how it becomes a slippery slope. When there is profound darkness in a person's life, and depression and narcissism take over, it will eventually lead the person to the state where they cannot get out of their rut: "No person could see his brother, nor could any person rise from his place for three days." Their paralysis was so intense that even

when they tried they could not lift themselves out of their morass. The situation so deteriorated that every effort at generating some light was quickly swallowed up by the "black hole" of Mitzraim.

This latter period of darkness where "no person could rise from his place" reigned for three days that followed the earlier three day period in which "No person could see his brother." The cycle begins with self-imposed constraints (Mitzraim). It degenerates into darkness and a breakdown of our interpersonal relationships and the narcissistic obsession with our own darkness. This, in turn, declines further into a state where we cannot rise; we are utterly helpless.

Three Days and Three Days: Three Attributes and Three Attributes

We can now understand somewhat the significance of the two three day periods.

In Kabbalah we are taught that the word "day" in the Torah can also refer to attributes; either G-d's Divine Sefirot, or the soul's faculties and traits. For example, when G-d created the world in six days, the Zohar explains, it means that He created the world by way of His six emotional attributes.

Similarly here, when the Torah says that there was darkness for three days it can also mean that this palpable darkness affected their three dominant attributes. And since the Torah repeats the phrase "three days" it suggests that all six emotional attributes of the one who is in the "Mitzraim-black hole" were affected.

The first attribute is chesed, kindness and love. It is the first victim of darkness. One who is down in the dumps and so wrapped up in his or her own life cannot express love and show kindness to others. Either their energy is depleted or it is directed entirely towards themselves.

The second attribute is gevurah, which means judgment or discipline. When a person is in the dark, and depressed because of their Mitzraim situation they will look for pleasure in areas that ought to be off-limits. They find it hard to follow a discipline. Moreover, a person who becomes so self-absorbed will eventually become self-indulgent as well. The blinding self-love that comes from the darkness will cover up and make them blind to any of their own faults.

The third attribute known as Tiferes, is a blend and balance between chesed and gevurah. A person in the dumps and blind to other's needs and feelings is certainly not capable of striking the right balance between chesed and gevurah. When one suffers from an acute case of imbalance between body and soul, which is essentially what

being in Mitzraim is all about, cannot be expected to maintain the delicate balance between their soul's faculties.

Even the Branches were Affected

All the other attributes are either offshoots of the two attributes of chesed and gevurah. One salient difference between the first three and the last three is that the last three are emotions that are closer to one's actual behavior. They include, tenacity (Netzach), submission (Hod) and bonding (Yesod).

Obviously the person, who is emotionally and spiritually paralyzed by the darkness that engulfs his or her soul and cannot express love or compassion and lacks the power of discipline, cannot possibly be tenacious. To be tenacious one must be utterly focused and goal oriented. A person trapped in his or her own skin and pettiness and whose focus is narrow cannot be expected to be goal oriented.

Likewise submissive to a Higher power and to others requires a great measure of humility and sense of what really matters. How can a person trapped in his or her own selfish and narrow life submit to another?

It goes without saying that the Mitzraim-paralysis syndrome precludes one for bonding to another. Bonding, even more than love, requires the ability to break out of

one's own boundaries and embrace the other; the antithesis of Mitzraim.

Escape!

How does one get out of Mitzraim?

There are three parts to the answer:

First, we have to know that we are in distress; that we are in Mitzraim.

Second, we must seek help. We cannot liberate ourselves. G-d must take us out of Mitzraim.

Third, our role in this process is to not resist being free. We must allow G-d to take us out of this terrible state of darkness and not decide that we cannot ever get out of this rut.

Tragically, there were many Jews back then who did want to leave Egypt, and our Sages tell us that they all perished and were buried in the week of the plague of darkness. A Jew must, at the very least, harbor a desire to get out of his or her personal Mitzraim.

On the most basic level this means that a person who is in a rut must ask for help. This includes assistance from G-d as well as assistance from those who are G-d's agents for help. Going to a physician or a therapist is not a sign that

one lacks faith, but, on the contrary, it is a sign that one believes that G-d endowed people with the talent and knowledge to help others, which is the very reason He put us here in the first place.

The Message for Today

This message is as timely now as it has ever been. We are at the tail end of exile and in many ways enveloped in darkness. And while in some places and individuals there is light, for even as they are in exile they maintain their proud identities as children of Israel, nevertheless, for a great many there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

These people must know that they feel this way because they are in the straits of Mitzraim. They must also turn to G-d and other sensitive messengers of G-d for support and guidance, and must harbor a desire to leave exile; certainly not to resist getting out of exile, either the personal one or the collective one.

There is just one significant difference between the exodus from this exile and the one we experienced in Egypt. Whereas, those Jews who refused to leave perished in Egypt, our Sages promise us that G-d will leave no Jew behind.

As the Rebbe explained on numerous occasions that once G-d came to every individual Jew and said to him or her at

Sinai, "I am G-d your G-d" a Jew became irrevocably connected to G-d and cannot sever his or her ties with Him no matter how hard we may protest. Even if a Jew is utterly resistant to the process of Geulah-Redemption, he or she will ultimately come around and recognize the essential bond he or she enjoys with G-d.

Every one of us will be liberated from this exile and experience the future Messianic Age.

Our cooperation is crucial nevertheless to help us make a smooth transition from exile to Redemption; so that when it happens it happens not in spite of us but because of us—we become a a part of the process..

ESSAY SIXTEEN

THE ANGELS WERE BAFFLED

G-d was not threatening Adam with death; He was telling him that a human being has essentially two options:

"You can exercise your G-d given ability to transcend your own nature, but to maintain that level of transcendence you must keep your mind attuned to the Torah. Because it is the Torah mentality that transcends nature and temporality.

However if you lose that ability because you allowed yourself the license to distance yourself from Torah study and dabble in foreign pastures then you must descend to the second alternative: to realizing your own mortality and that therefore physical and material pleasures are merely transitory.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

THE ANGELS WERE BAFFLED

A Puzzling Midrash

Exactly two weeks before the Exodus G-d introduces the first Mitzvah to Moses and Aaron,

> "This month shall be for you the head of the months. It shall be the first of the months of the year for you."

There is a puzzling Midrash on this verse:

> When G-d said "This month shall be for you" the ministering angels said to G-d, "Why did you tell Adam 'On the day you shall eat from it you shall surely die?'"
>
> G-d answered, "In the future the son of Yishai [King David] will emerge who will say, 'Tremble and sin not; reflect in your hearts on your beds, and be utterly silent forever.'"

This Midrash is culled from a body of Midrashic selections that were designed as riddles so that we should search to

discover their meaning. Presumably it was not just to sharpen our minds but, rather, to uncover a layer of meaning that can be shown to relate to our own lives.

We Control Time!

Let us try to decipher this Midrash:

The Midrash quotes the opening words of the commandment to establish a system of determining the months, "G-d said, 'This month shall be for you'" What does this verse say and what does it imply?

The simple meaning of this phrase is that on the first day of the month of Nissan, two weeks before the Exodus, G-d informed Moses and Aaron that when they see the new moon it would represent the beginning of the month, the first month of the year.

However, the Talmud uncovers a deeper meaning, one that has had far-reaching legal and even physical ramifications:

The Talmud focuses on the words "for you," and states that the decision and the ability to declare the new month resides with **you,** Moses and Aaron, or with your duly selected successors, the members of the Sanhedrin, whose function it would be to determine each month on the basis of the sighting of the moon. It is **you** who are empowered to declare when the new month will commence.

Furthermore, the Talmud teaches us, even if the courts were in error about the day they declared to be the first of the month, and even if it was deliberate on their part to delay the onset of the new month, it is still sanctified. The courts were given the power to change the timing of the new month. And, on that basis, the Holidays will follow suit. Passover, for example, which is on the fifteenth of the month of Nissan, will be on the fifteenth of the month, counting from the day the courts declared it to be Rosh Chodesh, even though in truth it should have been the day before.

Changing Biology

According to the Jerusalem Talmud, this declaration - which advances or delays the onset of the new month (and the same is true about the declaration of an extra leap-month to bring parity to the lunar and solar years) - can actually alter the biological changes within nature that hinge on time because the Torah has endowed us with even the power to control nature!

This was a revolutionary concept, revolutionary even with regard to the celestial forces. As the Midrash states that G-d and his entourage of angels in the "heavenly court" will "descend" here to consult with the human courts as to when the new month will be declared.

This indeed is the power entrusted to the Jewish people that they are not subservient to nature; on the contrary, nature can be subservient to them.

Why the Need for Self-Control?

When the angels realized this revolutionary power that was given to humans, they realized that those human beings do not essentially need external support for them to toe a straight line. If the human being, they argued, has the capacity to control the external nature of the world, how much more so that he has the power to control his or her own inner nature.

Why then, the angels asked, did G-d tell Adam that on the day he eats from this specific tree he shall surely die? The meaning of this threat was to discourage him from succumbing to his base instincts and animal nature. But why did Adam need to be threatened with death in order urge him to comply? Shouldn't it have sufficed for Adam to know that even if his nature tells him to eat of the forbidden fruit his mind should and would exercise control over his desires?

Adding to their confusion was the fact that the day that Adam was commanded not to eat the forbidden fruit, he nonetheless sinned, and was then punished was (according to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yehoshua) on the very first day

of Nissan, the same day that G-d told Moses that he did indeed have control over nature! But if this day did indeed give us the dynamic power to dominate nature, then why then did Adam have the need of the threat of death on that very day?

Human Complexity and Vulnerability

The angels were baffled. They could not comprehend the complexity of the human condition. Yes, there are certain people and certain times when the mere suggestion by a Higher authority that one should suppress one's own nature because it is the proper thing to do is sufficient. But, yes, there are also certain individuals and certain times when mortals are more vulnerable and must be reminded of their mortality. This the mono-dimensional angels could not comprehend.

Forgot Torah Knowledge

There is a story in the Talmud about one of the greatest Sages, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who moved away from his colleagues and the center of Torah at Yavneh to a certain place which was known for its choice wine and other worldly delights.

As a result of his "attraction" to these delights he forgot his Torah knowledge and even mispronounced the verse cited above. Instead of reading the Hebrew "*hachodesh hazeh lachem* - This month shall be for you" he read: "*hacheresh haya libam* - Was their heart silent." In Hebrew spelling the two phrases are almost identical. Indeed, the Talmud relates that the exiling of the Ten Tribes was a consequence of their close proximity to that place known for its sybaritic nature.

From this we derive that while a human being is endowed with the capacity to control nature, we also have the ability to travel to places, or to put ourselves in situations, where we are tempted or where we become desensitized, and where our minds no longer wield the same influence over our desensitized hearts. In these situations we must temporarily rely on the more morbid consideration of our mortality in order to win the battle with our evil impulse.

Disarming

G-d's response to the angels thus was to quote the son of Yishai, who alludes to the approach outlined in the Talmud: When one is plagued by the evil impulse he should ideally study Torah or read the Shema - which proclaims G-d's unity - in order to disarm this evil impulse.

And if neither of these tactics work, then, the Talmud tells us, remember the day of one's death.

When we lose control—or never had it in the first place—we should have a fallback position which keeps us going on the true Torah path. Thus G-d subtly suggests to Adam, "You may not have the ability to control nature all the time, but nevertheless you can overcome your temptations by realizing that you are mortal.

G-d was not threatening Adam with death; He was telling him that a human being has essentially two options: "You can exercise your G-d given ability to transcend your own nature, but to maintain that level of transcendence you must keep your mind attuned to the Torah. Because it is the Torah mentality that transcends nature and temporality. And to the extent that your mind is saturated with Torah knowledge it is to that degree to which you will always be in control.

However if you lose that ability because you allowed yourself the license to distance yourself from Torah study and dabble in foreign pastures, as did Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, then you must descend to the second alternative: to realizing your own mortality and that therefore physical and material pleasures are merely transitory."

Gematria of Moshiach ben Dovid

Commentators point out that the gematria (numerical value) of the words "This month shall be for you" is the same as that of Moshiach the son of David. This suggests that the power to control nature which is implicit in this verse will become obvious and the exclusive influence in the Messianic Age.

Moshiach will usher in a new consciousness wherein we will always be masters of nature. The world will follow the dictates of the Torah, and we will no longer need to invoke our own mortality. Thus life will return to the way it had been before Adam sinned—eternal life. There will be no need for mortality to keep us straight.

As long as we are in exile we must utilize the two-pronged approach in dealing with our challenges. But as we prepare for the imminent Redemption, the angels' objections to the need to remind man of his mortality will be sustained. By saturating our minds with Torah, specifically the parts of Torah that deal with Redemption, we gradually wean ourselves from the need to be reminded of our mortality and, instead, we prepare ourselves for the eternal life which will follow the coming of Moshiach and the complete Redemption.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

HARDENED HEARTS

We have a Divine soul.

We have received the Torah at Mount Sinai at which time G-d said to each and every one of us, "I am G-d your G-d," in the singular, to indicate that G-d is the life-force and the essence of each individual.

We have thousands of years of cumulative holiness which was generated by our forebears and has left an indelible mark on the Jewish and world landscape.

And we are now living in the dawn of the Messianic Age, where some of that light can already be seen on the horizon.

Certainly all the formidable obstacles are not sufficient to prevent us from breaking out of the shackles of our exile mentality so as to become receptive to the energies of Redemption.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

HARDENED HEARTS

Why Punish Pharaoh?

One of the most frequently asked questions by students of the Torah concerns the way G-d dealt with Pharaoh. G-d tells Moses that He has hardened his heart, yet G-d tells him to warn Pharaoh before the plague. This prompts the obvious question: why would G-d punish Pharaoh for not letting the Jews leave when it was G-d Himself who did not allow him to have a change of heart? And this leads to a follow-up question: why did G-d tell Moses to warn Pharaoh? Why was a warning necessary if He knew that Pharaoh would not heed his warning?

Rambam answers that the hardening of his heart was Pharaoh's own doing. When a person desensitizes himself through repeated violations of G-d's will he or she will reach a point of no return. According to the Rambam, that hardening process is the punishment for transgressing.

But the second question still remains. Why then did Moses have to warn him if he knew that Pharaoh was incapable of having a change of heart? Rambam addresses this question and answers that this itself is the lesson that there are certain people whose wickedness is so profound that they cannot help themselves anymore.

G-d Given Obstacles are Meant to Overcome

The Rebbe (*Likkutei Sichos* volume 6, p. 67), after establishing that Rashi concurs with Rambam's approach of Pharaoh's hardened heart, proceeds to qualify their approach. While it is true that the sins Pharaoh committed were creating the greatest impediments to his free choice and that G-d's hardening of his heart was the most formidable obstacle one could ever place before a human being, Pharaoh still had the ability to break out of the shackles of his hardened heart. Free choice is never denied anyone. Even the apostate Rabbi Acher, who heard a heavenly voice declaring that he was beyond the point of returning to G-d, was able to overcome even that obstacle, albeit with much more effort expended than for others.

The lesson from this approach is powerful. No matter how far we think we have become submerged in exile and its numbing effects on our spiritual lives, we can break out of it. Consider these facts: Pharaoh lived before the Torah was

given with its powerful Divine energy; did not possess a G-dly soul; was a tyrant; was the leader of the most morally depraved nation on earth; committed repeated atrocities in the way he enslaved and tortured the Jewish people, and, added to all of these negative character traits of Pharaoh, G-d Himself hardened his heart. Yet even after all these things, he nevertheless still had the ability to change. How much more so, we, the Jewish people, have that capacity to overcome all obstacles hindering us.

We have a Divine soul. We have received the Torah at Mount Sinai at which time G-d said to each and every one of us, "I am G-d **your** G-d," in the singular, to indicate that G-d is the life-force and the essence of each individual. All of us, even those who are classified as "the sinners of Israel", the Talmud states, "are filled with Mitzvos as a pomegranate is filled with seeds."

We have thousands of years of cumulative holiness which was generated by our forebears and has left an indelible mark on the Jewish and world landscape. And we are now living in the dawn of the Messianic Age, where some of that light can already be seen on the horizon.

Certainly all the formidable obstacles, both man-made and the one's planted by G-d, are not sufficient to prevent us from breaking out of the shackles of our exile mentality so as to become receptive to the energies of Redemption.

Change for the Right Reason

Ramban has another approach to the two questions as to why Pharaoh was punished and why a warning was necessary if G-d had already hardened his heart.

G-d wanted Pharaoh to have a change of heart, but he wanted him to have that change of heart not because of the fear of the pain he endured and the prospects of being subjected to even more pain. Rather G-d wished that his change of heart should be induced by his realization that there is one, all-powerful G-d. Even an animal will recoil in fear from the threat of punishment and behave as its master wants, but it has no appreciation for the master's superior intellect. That is why G-d hardened his heart: to teach him that his change of heart inspired by his fear of more suffering was not going to succeed. Only if he changed his entire way of thinking, if he would recognize the plagues as "signs" that there is a Higher force—then the plague would not have to happen.

Our Choice: Be Part of the Solution

The lesson we can derive from this is that in this day and age we have witnessed countless miracles. We have seen tremendous suffering and tragedy and also phenomenal miracles from the Six Day War to the collapse of the Soviet Union. These events should inspire us to recognize their

true Source. We must see the hand of G-d in all that is happening today as a means of breaking out of our internal exile.

If Pharaoh would have had a change of heart in that he would have fully recognized G-d's power he would have been part of the solution to the Egyptian exile and shared in the glory of the Exodus. Instead he chose the path of having the Exodus occur in spite of him and not because of him.

Similarly we have the choice of failing to see the "signs" and what they represent, or we can recognize G-d's hand in everything and read the signs carefully and so become the very forces of liberation. Either way the Redemption will happen. The only question is: will it happen in spite of us or because and through us?

Respond to the Messages

A third approach, offered by Seforno, is that if Pharaoh would have surrendered to G-d's will immediately, his recognition of G-d's power would have been minimal. G-d's hardening of his heart guaranteed there would be more plagues and wonders. These might finally enable him to develop a more sophisticated appreciation for G-d. G-d did not want to deny him the opportunity to do Teshuvah; He wanted him to grow spiritually. But in the end, Pharaoh

neither changed nor grew and thus his punishment was fully deserved.

The lesson from this approach for our day and age is that every moment of exile is painful. Even when we enjoy the comforts of modern life the fact that there is still pain and suffering in the world should be intolerable to every sensitive human being. The fact that G-d's presence is not felt by everyone and that evil is still rampant is unacceptable to us. The more spiritually sensitive among us are therefore constantly clamoring for Moshiach and the final Redemption.

Nevertheless every moment that we endure this exile, is intended for us to increase in our awareness of G-d and to see His hand in all that happens. Obviously we are not justifying the continuation of the exile nor are we giving G-d an "excuse" to prolong the agony. We do not understand **why** all of this is necessary, but we do know **what** G-d wants us to do and **how** to respond to exile. We must humbly protest the continuation of the exile, as we do continually in our daily prayers, even as we simultaneously search for and respond to the messages that are being conveyed by the events that surround us.

The Ba'al Shem Tov taught us that we must learn a lesson from everything we hear or see. We certainly have to learn lessons and grow from the events that we are living

through in these last moments of exile, as we stand on the threshold of Redemption.

Ten Stiff-Necked People

A fourth approach taken by some commentators is that, in truth, Pharaoh's free choice was not taken away from him. Pharaoh was endowed by G-d with the trait of stubbornness. Stubbornness, like most other human traits, is neither good nor bad. It depends on the way it is applied. Pharaoh could have used his stubbornness to insist on letting the Jews go despite all the arguments, economic and otherwise, to keep them enslaved. Pharaoh made the wrong choice and his obstinacy kept the Jews enslaved despite all the plagues that he endured.

The lesson for our day and age is that we are a "stiff necked people." We can use this for the right reason. No matter how long it has taken for Moshiach to come, we don't give up praying, pleading, and demanding that G-d make good on His promise.

In the Rebbe's historic message of the 28th of Nissan 5751 (1991), the Rebbe asked for "ten stiff necked" individuals who will not rest until they accomplish the goal of bringing the final Redemption. Let us attempt to be counted among that minyan that will change the world forever.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

THE ESSENTIAL, REBELLIOUS JEW

Shabbos is a reminder of G-d as our Creator.

Shabbos also possesses a secondary theme of liberation; a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.

What does liberation add to a person who already lives a blissful Shabbos life of serenity?

As peaceful and blissful as living in a private domain can be, we can still be locked in a virtual prison, constrained by the limits of our natural selves.

The human spirit demands of us to go beyond our comfort zone and break out of the external conventions that are imposed on us as well as overcoming our self-imposed limits.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

THE ESSENTIAL, REBELLIOUS JEW

Two Commandments: Singular and Plural

This week's parsha highlights the Exodus from Egypt and the commandments the Jews were given prior to their departure.

The main commandment concerned the Korban Pesach, the Paschal Offering. This offering involved sacrificing a lamb on the day before their departure—the fourteenth of Nissan—and to eat the meat of the Paschal lamb that night.

Two of the commandments associated with this offering were: a) to eat it in their homes and not take any of it outside and b) not to break any bones of the meat of the Paschal offering.

However, as commentators point out, there is an inconsistency in the way these two commands are written. With regard to taking the meat out of the house the Torah uses the singular verb form, whereas the plural form is used for the prohibition against breaking the bones of the

offering. Commentators discuss various reasons for this anomaly.

Maharam Chagiz provides an ingenious explanation from the legal perspective. If one has violated the rule and taken the offering outside he has violated this Biblical requirement. If another person were then to take it out a second time there would be no additional violation. Once the meat has been removed it stays removed.

With respect to the prohibition of breaking the bones of the offering the law is different. Even after one person has broken a bone while eating the Paschal offering, anyone else who breaks the same bone is also guilty of the prohibition.

Hence, the Torah uses the singular verb form for taking the meat outside since only one person can be in violation of that law. The prohibition against breaking bones, by contrast, can be committed by multiple individuals. The Torah thus employs the plural form.

Every detail of Torah must provide us with some insight into our own lives in our own time. What is the message in the foregoing distinction between the two prohibitions? Why is it that once a person has taken the Paschal offering out of the house, the next person will not be in violation if he takes it out as well? And why is the prohibition against breaking the bones of the offering different?

To explain this anomaly we must first understand the underlying rationale for these two prohibitions.

Shabbos Parallel

The Talmud states that the law that forbids taking the meat of the Paschal offering outside is analogous to the law of not carrying an object out of the house on Shabbos. One of the 39 categories of work that the Torah forbids is carrying an object from a private domain to a public domain.

Chassidic thought understands the public domain as a place that allows for strife, pain and unrest. The public arena, literally and figuratively, is inundated with a plethora of conflicting ideas and beliefs.

The private domain, contrarily, enjoys privacy, unity and tranquility. Indeed, the entire concept of Shabbos as a day of rest is based on the capacity of Shabbos to bring tranquility into the otherwise conflicted, fragmented, chaotic and troubled world that is our weekday experience.

The prohibition against carrying outside, therefore, is designed to maintain a state of inner peace because it allows us to return to and be in touch with our primal and simple core. Shabbos disentangles us from the web of quotidian life.

However, as beautiful and tranquil as Shabbos is, it does not suffice. In addition to rest, peace and a return to our inner selves, we also need to be liberated. And this is what the Passover holiday—and particularly the Paschal offering—is all about.

Indeed, even Shabbos possesses a secondary theme of liberation. We can see that in the Kiddush prayer recited Friday night, where we make reference to Shabbos first as a remembrance of Creation, and then as a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.

What does liberation add to a person who already lives a blissful Shabbos life of serenity?

As peaceful and blissful as living in a private domain can be, we can still be locked in a virtual prison, constrained by the limits of our natural selves. The human spirit demands of us to go beyond our comfort zone and break out of the external conventions that are imposed on us as well as overcoming our self-imposed limits.

This is the spiritual parallel to the Passover offering. It is the imperative to "pass over" and transcend our own natural limits. Whereas Shabbos's primary theme is going within to find our inner peace, the primary theme of Pesach — and the second theme of Shabbos — is self-transcendence.

But then the Torah makes what appears to be a counter intuitive statement: One must not take the Paschal lamb out of the house, just like on Shabbos.

The Paradox of Passover

How do we reconcile the idea of breaking out of boundaries with the idea of withdrawing into one's home and inner sanctum? Either we are to stay within or to break out? How can we do both?

The answer is that even when we break out and transcend, we must do so within the limits of the Torah because they are Divine limits which are not really limits as we understand that term. We do not have to negate the inner sanctity of Shabbos to liberate ourselves. True liberation is where we find within **ourselves** the hidden powers that enable us to go beyond our potential, but they dare not conflict with G-d's commandments that are Divine and therefore liberating and not limiting. The only thing that is limiting is the way we approach the experience of the commandments.

Moreover, self-transcendence is not about becoming something we are not. It doesn't require of us to cease being Shabbos Jews. It does not require of us to deny our selfhood and transform our identities. It does mean that we can dig deeper into our soul to discover heretofore

untapped reservoirs of G-dly energy which enable us to go beyond our previous potential.

Hence, the Torah compares the laws of not transporting the Paschal offering out of the private domain to the law of Shabbos. While Shabbos is about going within and Pesach is about breaking out, they can coexist. This teaches us that we are able to "break out" while yet remaining in our private domain.

Now we can understand why the Torah uses the singular to describe the law of not carrying the Paschal offering out of the private domain. Both Shabbos and Passover demand that we never leave the ideal of unity and singularity.

Don't Break/Deny Your Essence!

The Torah then continues to reinforce this idea with the command against breaking a bone of the Paschal offering.

The Hebrew word for bone – *etzem* — also means "essence." The essence of the Jew must not be compromised in the effort to break out of our boundaries. There is a tendency for those who are blessed with a rebellious nature to deny their own identity. And, tragically, in our own day and age there have been many Jews who have rebelled against their own heritage and even denied their Jewish identity.

"Don't break the bones of the Paschal offering" can now be understood as teaching that being a rebel does not mean to break and deny one's essential identity!

More specifically, these twin admonitions address two perils for those who seek to be liberated:

First, the rebellious Jew may misdirect that positive energy and throw off the "shackles" of the Mitzvos, reasoning that free spirits do not need to be told how to micro-manage their lives. As protection against this mindset the Torah admonishes us to keep the Paschal lamb (read: the idea of liberation and breaking out of boundaries) in the home - the overarching structure of Judaism.

However, once a person has compromised a commandment in order to "free" his or her spirit, the next modification to that commandment cannot do any more harm. Once we have begun to corrupt the Mitzvah it is no longer G-d's commandment and no additional modification can further reduce its value. Thus, the Torah employs the singular to underscore that taking the Paschal offering out of the context of Jewish law is a singular offense.

Second, the rebellious Jew may also go so far as to deny his or her identity as a Jew. However, no matter how many times one may try to deny his or her essence it cannot change that essence. A Jew remains a Jew notwithstanding

strident protests. Thus, every time someone denies his or her essential identity it constitutes a new violation.

Moshiach: A Shabbos and Pesach Jew

The message conveyed by these two commandments is especially relevant today as we focus on the imminent coming of Moshiach and the final Redemption he will usher in. There is a double misconception, however, that first Moshiach will change those laws of the Torah that can be viewed superficially as stifling and constraining and second that he will alter our essential identity so we will no longer be the persons we were in the past.

Nothing is further from the truth. Moshiach is the ultimate liberator because he possesses both qualities: He is both a Shabbos and a Passover personality. Moshiach is the source of inner tranquility and therefore he is eminently qualified to unite the Jewish people and usher in the future Era of Redemption—the Shabbos of history.

Moshiach also possesses the opposite quality of constantly breaking out of the structures that impose limits on him; always looking for new ways of transforming himself and the entire world.

Moshiach's function is to combine these two paradoxical features. On the one hand we will feel the greatest sense of inner peace and delight in the Messianic Age and,

simultaneously, we will be energized to break new ground. However, this liberating aspect of Moshiach will not compromise one iota of the Mitzvos. On the contrary, Maimonides asserts that Moshiach's role is to make the Mitzvos complete and enhance their integrity.

In addition, Moshiach will not change who we are, even as he inspires us to break out of our limits. Rather he will reveal the hidden energies that we already possess that empower us to chart new courses enabling us to reach new heights and depths.

ESSAY NINETEEN

NO MORE BARKING

All the earlier plagues were designed primarily to punish the Egyptians, prove that there is an all-powerful G-d, repudiate the Egyptian deities and magicians, and establish the unique status of the Jewish people.

The final plague of the First-Born introduced a new dimension: that G-d's relationship to the Jewish people was beyond that of a benevolent King who seeks justice but rather one of a loving and caring Father.

How did this manifest itself? By what would otherwise seem an unnecessary miracle, He eliminated even the natural nuisance of dogs barking (when the Angel of Death was close by) so that the Jewish people could feel totally secure in their homes during the final plague.

With this miracle, G-d demonstrated that His loving relationship with us transcends all limits and bounds.

ESSAY NINETEEN

NO MORE BARKING

Reward for the Dogs?

One of the ancillary aspects of the Exodus, mentioned in this week's parsha, was that the dogs in Egypt remained silent during the plague of the Death of the Firstborn.

When Moses informs Pharaoh about the impending Tenth Plague, the Death of the Firstborn, he adds:

"There shall be a great outcry in the entire land of Egypt, such as there has never been and such as there shall never be again. But against all the Children of Israel, no dog shall sharpen his tongue, against neither man nor beast, so that you shall know that G-d will have distinguished between Egypt and Israel."

Our Sages tell us that as a reward for their not barking and their display of respect for the Israelites, the Torah awarded the dogs with a specific type of non-kosher meat. The meat of an animal injured by a predator is called *treifah* (from which the Yiddish word *treif* evolved to mean any non-kosher substance). The Torah declares: "Do not eat

flesh that is torn off in the field. Throw it to the dogs." Our Sages (*Mechilta*, cited by Rashi) state that this was the reward for not barking when the Jews left Egypt.

What is the significance of the dogs not barking at that time? And what connection is there between the silence of the Egyptian dogs and the Torah rewarding them with non-kosher meat?

Moreover, why was the reward limited to *treifah* and not extended to other types of forbidden meat, such as *neveilah* (an animal that died without ritual slaughter) or unclean animals, etc.?

We must also understand why, specifically, there was the added distinction between the Jews and Egyptians of the dogs not barking when the Plague of the Firstborn itself provided the starkest distinction of all, wherein not one Jew died even as every Egyptian household experienced at least one death?

A Miracle!

Tosphos addresses the question of the importance of the dogs not barking. According to Tosphos, it was a miracle since the Talmud teaches us that whenever the Angel of Death is in town, the dogs bark. Here, despite the presence of the Angel of Death, the miracle was that the dogs did not bark.

However, this explanation merely begs another question, why was this miracle necessary? It is axiomatic that G-d does not perform miracles needlessly.

No Slander

Another explanation is given in light of the saying of our Sages, "One who speaks *lashon hara* –slander - deserves to be thrown to the dogs." In an earlier parsha, when Moses heard how two Jews were capable of slander, he was so disheartened that he questioned whether the Jewish people as a whole were worthy of being redeemed.

However, even upon the Jews' departure from Egypt the dogs did not bark. It was an indication that the Jewish people had fully atoned for their sin of *lashon hara* and were worthy of being redeemed.

Here too the question can be asked: why it was necessary for the miracle of the non-barking dogs to prove this point? Wouldn't it have sufficed for the dogs simply not to attack the Jews? Furthermore, the mere fact that the Jewish people did not suffer any of the earlier plagues should have amply demonstrated that the Jews were worthy of being spared. Why the need for this unusual miracle of keeping the dogs silent?

Display of Fatherly Love

One may suggest that this miracle was intended to demonstrate G-d's love for the Jewish people in a fashion not seen in the earlier plagues. Silencing the dogs was G-d's way of demonstrating that not only was He prepared to liberate the Jews from cruel slavery, He did not want them to suffer any discomfort or annoyance along the way, such as having to hear the barking of the dogs.

The fact that this miracle was unnecessary for the survival and freedom of the Jews demonstrated that G-d was not just trying to alleviate the harshest aspects of their bondage. He was also going to "pamper" them by removing even a minor discomfort.

Where does this aspect of love and concern for the Jewish people come from? It is based on the fact that G-d regards us as His children. If we go back to the first time G-d speaks to Moses, as he stood before the Burning Bush, we can discover the rationale for this added display of love.

In parshas Shemos we read:

> G-d said to Moses, "When you go to return to Egypt reflect on all the miracles that I have placed in your hand, and perform them before Pharaoh. I will, however, strengthen his heart, and he will not send the people away. You shall say to Pharaoh, 'This is what G-d said: Israel is My son, My firstborn! I say

> to you, send out My Son so that he may worship Me. If you refuse to send him out, I am going to slay your firstborn son.'"

As Rashi writes, this statement was obviously a reference to the final plague of the death of the firstborn Egyptians. And here we see how, from the very outset, G-d let it be known to Moses, who in turn would let it be known to Pharaoh, that the relationship of G-d to the Jewish people was one of a loving father to his firstborn child. This introduction that Moses received from G-d was also specifically attached to the final plague of the firstborn, implying that everyone would see this as basis of their relationship at that time.

All the earlier plagues were designed primarily to punish the Egyptians, prove that there is an all-powerful G-d, repudiate the Egyptian deities and magicians, and establish the unique status of the Jewish people. This final plague introduced a new dimension: that G-d's relationship to the Jewish people was beyond that of a benevolent King who seeks justice but rather one of a loving and caring Father.

How did this manifest itself? By what would otherwise seem an unnecessary miracle, He eliminated even the natural nuisance of dogs barking (when the Angel of Death was close by) so that the Jewish people could feel totally secure in their homes during the final plague. With this

miracle, G-d demonstrated that His loving relationship with us transcends all limits and bounds.

This analytical approach also sheds light on the explanation that the lack of barking demonstrated that the Jewish people were no longer guilty of the sin of *lashon hara* and therefore were worthy of their newfound freedom. When is G-d's fatherly love for us most pronounced? It is when we show love for one another. There is no greater pleasure for a parent than knowing His children recognize each other as brothers and sisters. When a person recognizes and strengthens his or her relationship with a sibling who is the child of their common parents, it is also an affirmation of the parent's role as a parent.

Hence the absence of barking—a sign of G-d's loving fatherly relationship with us—is a direct consequence of our loving relationship with one another.

Be Holy!

We can now also understand why the reward for the dogs was the *treifah* meat. The commandment not to partake of such meat is prefaced in the Torah with the words: "People of Holiness shall you be to Me; you shall not eat flesh of an animal that was torn in the field."

The definition of holiness includes the quality of being different and apart. When a Jew realizes that, as one of G-

d's firstborn children, he or she is different from other peoples, he or she will not eat treifah. Unlike other non-kosher meat, such as that of ritually unclean animals or animals that die without having been slaughtered, there is nothing apparently objectionable about this kosher species of animal that was slaughtered properly after being torn in the field. Nevertheless, the Jew refrains from this meat because he or she wants to show love for G-d and thus acts differently. This is therefore the fitting "reward" for the dogs who did not bark. The act of feeding this type of meat to the dogs reminds us of G-d's love for us and our reciprocal love for Him.

Preparation for the Redemption

The events of the Exodus teach us how we are to prepare ourselves for the final and imminent Redemption.

It almost goes without saying that every effort at brotherly peace and expressions of Ahavas Yisroel - love for our fellow Jew - that is based on the concept of Jewish unity (*Achdus Yisroel*) is the challenge of the hour. Not only do we need this unity to make us fully worthy of the Redemption, but moreover, as the Rebbe stressed, it is how we must prepare ourselves for the future when that unity will be fully revealed.

When we act in a holy (read: different) manner in our relationship with G-d (as expressed by observing the prohibition against *treifah* meat despite its apparent innocuous nature) and with regard to our relationships with one another (where we find it painful to speak or even think ill of our Jewish brothers and sisters, with whom we share our Heavenly Father) we will see how the "dogs" (which the Kabbalists state are the forces of evil, particularly Israel's arch enemy, Amalek) cease to "bark." We will then be ready to enter into the Messianic Age without even the slightest annoyance to detract from our peace and joy.

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ESSAY TWENTY

THE EXPLOSION

In the Messianic Age, the Rebbe explains, we will not just be the beneficiaries of the conventional kindness and compassion that are associated with Abraham and Jacob.

Rather the full force of Divine beneficence will break through all the obstructions that are the product of our shortcomings and the stifling and inhibiting influence of Galus.

ESSAY TWENTY

THE EXPLOSION

Couldn't See the Earth

The eighth plague, the locusts, was arguably the most devastating plague of all, after the plague of the firstborn. When an agrarian society has its crops consumed by locusts it faces mass starvation with deadly results. No other plague had the potential to wipe out as many people as this one.

When Moses warned Pharaoh of this impending plague he described it thus:

> "For if you refuse to let them go, then tomorrow I am going to bring a swarm of locusts into your border. It will obscure the view of the earth and no one will be able to see the earth."

This translation follows the commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, who explain that the words "no one will be able to see the earth", refers to the people.

However, the classic commentator, *Kli Yakar*, reads a deeper meaning into this text, actually translating it more literally. When one reads this verse in the original Hebrew, its literal rendition yields a very different result: The locusts themselves will not be able to see the earth they are consuming!

This translation, when taken at face value, appears to be bizarre. One can easily convey the devastating nature of the plague by stating that no person would be able to see the earth because it would be covered with locusts. This clearly describes the magnitude of the plague. However, what value is there in the knowledge that the locusts couldn't see the earth? How does that add to our understanding of the plague?

Kli Yakar's answer is that when people cannot see the food they are consuming their hunger will not be satisfied. This premise is based on the Biblical description of the Manna as food of affliction. No matter how nourishing the Divine food was, the people who consumed it remained hungry. The Talmud explains that when we cannot see what we are eating, we do not feel satiated. This is also one of the reasons we light the candles for Shabbos. One of the commandments associated with Shabbos is to enjoy it by eating special Shabbos food. We cannot fully appreciate and enjoy the food in the dark.

Based on this premise, the *Kli Yakar* concludes that the locust's inability to see the earth they were consuming actually magnified the effects of the plague. Due to their blindness they would devour the vegetation of Egypt ravenously. They would leave nothing, since no matter how much they ate they would not be sated. Because they would not be satisfied with what they ate outdoors, they would even enter the houses to find food there.

That is all well and good, but we must still probe for the deeper significance of the locusts not being able to see the earth and how it can apply to our understanding of the process of the Exodus.

Ten Plagues: Ten Lessons

The Ten Plagues were not just punishment for Pharaoh and the Egyptian people for their cruel enslavement of the children of Israel. The Ten Plagues were also intended to shatter the wall that separated the reality of G-d's existence and the distorted view of reality held by Egyptian culture. The Ten Plagues were intended to impress upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians of G-d's abiding love for the Jewish people, whom He characterized as "My first born son."

In truth, the Ten Plagues were also intended for the Jewish people, to prepare them for their Exodus and for the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Moreover, these Ten Plagues have something to teach us as well. When we probe beneath their surface we will discover a message that will prepare us for our liberation from Exile. It will do so by removing the obstructions that exist between G-d's reality and our exile-tainted and distorted perception of reality.

In light of the above, we must try to understand what we can learn from the plague of locusts, particularly from the fact that the locusts themselves were blinded and could not see the earth they were eating from.

Locusts: Extraordinary Blessings?

The word for locust in Hebrew is *arbeh.* This word can also be found in the Torah in several of G-d's blessings as in, "I will multiply your seed." The very word that represents one of nature's greatest curses, threatening the very lifeblood of a country, is also the word that speaks of extraordinary proliferation of life.

Moreover, the word *arbeh* has the same numerical value as *Yitzchak,* the second Patriarch.

What is the connection between Yitzchak and proliferation? Isn't Yitzchak associated with the trait of Gevurah, which means judgment, constriction and restriction? One would imagine *gevurah* is the very opposite of proliferation and growth

The Rebbe (*Toras Menachem* 5742) sheds light on this matter by referring to a Talmudic statement (*Shabbos* 89b) that in the Messianic Era, we will refer to Yitzchak, exclusively, as our father.

At first glance, this seems rather strange inasmuch as we always refer to all three Patriarchs as our fathers.

Furthermore, the Talmud describes Yitzchak as the one who will defend the Jewish nation while Abraham and Jacob will not! This too is rather counterintuitive in light of the fact that Abraham personifies the attribute of kindness and Jacob embodies the trait of compassion. Yet, it is Isaac, who represents the attribute of *gevurah*-judgment who will mount the most strident defense of even the most recalcitrant Jews!

The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of *gevura*h. On the one hand, it limits the flow of *chesed*-kindness. On the other hand, *gevurah* actually means strength. A *gevurah* personality, in fact, uses extraordinary powers to restrict and discipline himself precisely because he is strong.

When, however, there is a need to unleash unbridled fountains of Divine energy, the Yitzchak/*gevurah* personality generates and releases far more potent forces of kindness than his *chesed* counterpart.

A simple analogy illustrates this point. *Gevurah* relative to the flow of *chesed* is what a dam is relative to the flow of a river. Initially, it blocks the full force of the river and allows only as much water as is desired to trickle through the obstruction. However, when enough water accumulates it pushes the dam aside and an extraordinary torrent of water is unleashed that carries an exponentially greater volume along with the dam itself. Such is the power of *gevurah*.

Breaking through all of the Obstructions

In the Messianic Age, the Rebbe explains, we will not just be the beneficiaries of the conventional kindness and compassion that are associated with Abraham and Jacob. Rather the full force of Divine beneficence will break through all the obstructions that are the product of our shortcomings and the stifling and inhibiting influence of Galus.

Thus, in the Messianic Age, it will be the Yitzchak's power, specifically, that will remove all the obstacles and allow the

proliferation of positive energy to cover the earth with a spiritual sea.

The Plague of Locusts Revisited

We can now return to the plague of locust-*arbeh*. While this plague attacked the agricultural infrastructure of Egypt in the most physical sense it also unleashed the potential for the positive power of *arbeh* to enter the world.

We can now reinterpret the verse which describes the way the locusts covered the earth. One can draw a parallel between this covering of the earth and the one described in Isaiah, "And the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea."

But, how do we apply the part of the locusts themselves not being able to see the earth which, as the *Kli Yakar* explained provoked their ravenous appetite.

As was mentioned above, when the obstructive nature of the dam-gevurah causes the water to accumulate, not only does it ultimately break through the obstruction with incredible force, it takes the dam with it.

Similarly, when the dynamic of Geulah-Redemption is ready to unfold, as it is today, not only does it unleash extraordinary force, it also takes the dam with it. The

obstruction itself first causes the intense power to develop and then it becomes a part of the unprecedented flow.

When this occurs, even the heretofore negative features of Galus can no longer "see the earth." All humanity then develops a ravenous thirst and hunger for G-dliness. We consume every bit of G-dly awareness that can be accessed outside in the "field." This means that we see G-dliness in every blade of grass and everything that exists regardless of its corporeal nature.

The Age of Arbeh

However, the *arbeh*'s appetite is not satisfied. We then look for more overt G-dly expression in the "**houses** of the Egyptians." This is an allusion to the Bais Hamikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, which will be built with the efforts that we made here in the Diaspora to create miniature Sanctuaries in our synagogues, Houses of Torah Study and our own homes. These Sanctuaries, the Talmud relates, will be reestablished in Jerusalem and attached to the Bais Hamikdash! There will be an explosion of G-dly knowledge and awareness that will mirror the physical delights that will proliferate in the Messianic Age.

How does one prepare for this age of unprecedented goodness?

When we whet our appetite to learn more of Torah and never quench our thirst or satisfy our hunger, we prepare for the age of unlimited knowledge. This is especially true when we study the spiritual dimension of Torah, which focuses on revealing the Divine in the physical world and to see things from a Divine perspective which doesn't see the Earth with an existence independent of G-d..

Our generation has been inundated by an unprecedented explosion of Torah knowledge. We have already been given a taste of what is to come. Let us plunge into this sea of knowledge and with that experience prepare ourselves for the ultimate and imminent Age of Arbeh.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

OPEN THE DOOR

Freedom is not a right; it is an obligation.

Although there are times when we must surrender our freedom for an overriding purpose, we must never allow ourselves to become career servants.

The concept of servitude is only desirable when it is service to G-d.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

OPEN THE DOOR

Blood on the Doorposts

Each of the details that surround the Exodus from Egypt are instructive for all times. They are particularly significant for our own day and age as we look for ways to bring an end to our exile by recreating the dynamic forces of liberation unleashed at the time of the Exodus. When an event associated with the Exodus occurs in close proximity to the physical departure from Egypt, it is even more relevant to our own situation.

In the process of Redemption there are two components: that which G-d does for us and that which we do ourselves. The relevance of any event in our Exodus is magnified when it involves action by the Jewish people. And any aspect of the Exodus that involved the actions of the Jewish people in close proximity to the Exodus warrants even closer examination.

The Door: Symbol of Freedom

Let us try to fathom the deeper significance of the sprinkling of blood on the **doorposts** of the Jewish homes on the night of the Tenth Plague, when the Death of the Firstborn Egyptians occurred.

The Torah teaches us that when a Jewish indentured servant completes his six year term of service but insists on staying a servant, the Torah requires that the master bore a hole through his ear and into the door.

The Jerusalem Talmud (Kiddushin 1:2) asks, "why the door? Because it was through the door that they [the Jewish people] went from slavery to freedom." The Jerusalem Talmud obviously refers to the doors marked by the ritual of sprinkling blood on the doorposts on the night of the Exodus. The door thus acquired the symbolism of freedom.

The servant who insists on remaining in servitude to another human being evidently fails to appreciate the value of and imperative for freedom. To underscore this lesson of the importance of freedom, he gets his ear bored to the door.

Freedom is not a right; it is an obligation. Although there are times when we must surrender our freedom for an overriding purpose (e.g., a thief who cannot make restitution, we must never allow ourselves to become

career servants. The concept of servitude is only desirable when it is service to G-d.

But Why the Door?

We must try to understand why the door, of all physical objects, symbolizes freedom.

It is interesting that the very same consonants which spell door in Hebrew "*deles*" can also be read as "*dalus,*" denoting poverty. What connection can we find between poverty and a door? And how can we reconcile the ideas of poverty and freedom, as they appear to be antithetical states of existence. A poor person is always indebted to others. Proverbs (22:7) says as much in the verse "the borrower is a servant to the lender." It is poverty that forces a person into servitude. Yet, the very same word root that expresses the idea of freedom from poverty can actually mean poverty itself!

The truth is that *deles* has two opposite meanings. On the one hand it means poverty and on the other hand it means to be uplifted. It is both poor and rich.

The Poverty and Wealth of Speech

Chassidic literature applies this duality to the Divine attribute of Malchus, the Divine power of speech responsible for Creation. Our own human gift of speech derives from this Divine power of speech.

Speech is simultaneously the poorest and richest of all of our faculties. On one hand, Malchus or speech is represented by the metaphor of the moon, which has no light of its own. It is utterly poor. Words on their own are just scratches on a piece of paper or mere sounds created by a mechanical movement of our vocal chords.

But speech also is a medium that can carry the richest ideas and sentiments and transmit them to others. Speech, like the moon which reflects radiant sunlight, can reflect profound wisdom and powerful emotions.

This is very much like a door. The door blocks an opening in the wall and serves as a barrier for anyone who wishes to enter or exit. But simultaneously the door can swing open and allow traffic to flow through the wall in both directions. It both obstructs and facilitates movement.

We can now understand how the door, and the power of speech it represents, has become the symbol of freedom.

Pesach: The Freedom of Speech

The great Kabbalist, the Arizal, explains that Pesach marks the freedom of speech. The word Pesach is a composite of two words *peh sach*, which means the "mouth speaks."

When we lose the art of communication, when we cannot express ourselves through speech, we are truly in a type of exile. There can be two ways of understanding the state of exile associated with one's inability to communicate due to psychological and spiritual impediments, rather than physical causes.

First, it is obvious that a person struck dumb cannot relate well to the outside world. Without proper communication skills one cannot have a meaningful relationship with others. The speechless individual dwells in his or her own cocoon. The lack of communication creates an invisible but powerful "electronic fence" that keeps others out of your life and you out of theirs.

That is prison or exile at its worst. A human being is distinguished from all other creatures by his ability to speak. Whenever our Sages describe the four levels of existence (inanimate, vegetative, animal and human), the term used to describe the human being is *midaber,* the speaker or communicator. One's compromised ability to communicate is a direct challenge one's very humanity. In

other words, the inability to communicate adequately places one's humanity in a particularly disagreeable state of imprisonment. Even a physical prisoner is freer than one who cannot verbalize ideas and feelings. The former's **body** is behind bars, whereas the latter's **humanity** is behind bars.

Second, frequently the person's inability to communicate with others can be a sign that he or she is not in touch with his or her own feelings. In other words, they cannot even communicate with themselves. Our Sages say, "Speech is the pen of the heart." But if our hearts are dulled, and our feelings are muted, then there is nothing to express.

To communicate with and care about others, we must be able to communicate and connect with ourselves. Communication is not only saying words to another; it is also a form of self-expression. If we have lost touch with ourselves and we no longer know who **we** are, how can we truly communicate with one another? What can we express other than superficial banter and banalities?

One of the deplorable characteristics of Galus is that many people do not know who they are and what they're really all about. Their personality is a mystery even to themselves and therefore their whole being is in an internal exile. This is so whether they suffer from low self-esteem or from an inflated sense of self. Either way, they don't really know

who they are. This wretched state is what the prohibition of eating, benefiting from and owning *chometz*-inflated dough during Passover, discussed in this week's parsha, is all about. If we want to be free, the fundamental message of Pesach, we must not suffer from self-delusion.

The key to true freedom is thus the ability to communicate with others, which in its turn hinges on the ability to be in touch with oneself.

The Mezuzah as Symbol

We can now better appreciate the Mitzvah of placing a Mezuzah on the doorpost of our homes. This act is modeled on the sprinkling of blood on the doorposts of our Egyptian homes before the Tenth Plague.

According to Maimonides, the Biblical requirement of affixing a Mezuzah applies only when there is an actual door in the entrance as opposed to an open passageway. What is the spiritual rationale for this requirement?

Nachmanides writes (Commentary on the Torah, end of this week's parsha) that the Mezuzah and Tefillin are both signs of the Exodus. Tefillin contain the section of the Torah that discusses the need to remember the Exodus. But how is the Mezuzah a remembrance of the Exodus? There

is absolutely no mention of the Exodus in the Mezuzah parchment!

By now it should be clear that the Mezuzah on our doorposts is indeed a dramatic expression of true freedom; it symbolizes the unfettered power of speech represented by the door metaphor. Moreover, it represents a power of speech consistent with the ideals contained within the Mezuzah; particularly, the idea of G-d's unity.

Every time we pass the Mezuzah it reminds us that we need to have our own "door" (read: power of speech) influenced by the unity of G-d as contained in the Mezuzah. When an awareness of G-d's unity defines our home, our lives and our speech, we are no longer in an internal prison. We know who we are and our rightful place in the cosmos. That awareness is the catalyst to our complete Redemption, whereby external and internal freedoms merge.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

TEN PLAGUE THERAPY (2)

There is one aspect of our animal nature that cannot be salvaged. The part of us that is destructive, spiteful, and hateful must be eliminated.

But the parts of our animal nature such as self-interest, jealousy, pride, desire for pleasure, etc., can and must be harnessed for the good.

When jealousy motivates us to learn more and do more good for the world; that is a stepping stone to doing good for its own sake.

In the fifth plague of *dever*, G-d struck the Egyptian animals but not those of the Israelites. By absolutely rejecting the Egyptian animals and simultaneously lending support to the positive side of our animal nature we are capable of getting off the ground and on our way out of the stifling environment of Egypt.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

TEN PLAGUE THERAPY (2)

The First Four Plagues

In the book "Light from the Future – Parshas Vo'eira" the Ten Plagues were characterized not simply as a harsh punishment for the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, but also as a ten-step therapy that shatters the obstacles to spiritual growth. We also stated that these ten steps were a preparation for the Ten Commandments that the Israelites received at Sinai seven weeks after their Exodus from Egypt.

The first four plagues were then discussed in light of the therapy aspect they represented.

The Fifth and Sixth Plagues

This week we will continue with the next two plagues: *dever* (pestilence) and *shechin* (boils).

With respect to the plague of *dever*, which killed the Egyptian animals, the Torah makes it clear that this plague

did not extend to the animals of the Israelites.

What does this mean in terms of our development and how does it relate to the Fifth Commandment of honoring your father and mother?

After having destroyed our relationship with the icons that we worship (represented by the plagues of blood and frogs, respectively, which came out of the Nile, the river the Egyptians deified), and having recognized the idea that small, incremental steps are cherished by G-d (symbolized by the plague of lice, the tiny creatures that only G-d was able to create and not Pharaoh's sorcerers) and after realizing our special relationship with G-d (exemplified by the plague of the mixture of wild animals that affected the Egyptians and not the Israelites), the fourth plague takes us a step further.

Not only is it important for us to realize that there is a holy side to our personality that is distinguishable from our unholy ("Egyptian") part, it is equally important to appreciate that even the animal within us consists of two dimensions:

There is one aspect of our animal nature that **cannot** be salvaged. The part of us that is destructive, spiteful, and hateful, to cite a few examples, must be eliminated. But the parts of our animal nature such as self-interest, jealousy, pride, desire for pleasure, etc., can and must be harnessed for the good. And while it would seem far more

appropriate to cultivate our G-dly soul's sense of altruism and quest for the spiritual, the only way we can get there is by allowing our "animal" to feel that there is good in spiritual pursuits because they satisfy our selfish interests as well. When jealousy motivates us to learn more and do more good for the world, that is a stepping stone to doing good for its own sake.

Hence, in the fifth plague of *dever*, G-d struck the **Egyptian** animals but not those of the Israelites. By absolutely rejecting the Egyptian animals and simultaneously lending support to the positive side of our animal nature we are capable of getting off the ground and on our way out of the stifling environment of Egypt.

Parallels Honoring Parents

This fifth plague can thus be said to parallel the Fifth Commandment of honoring our parents. In the most narrow sense, parents are our providers and honoring them is a way to guarantee that we are taken care of. It is a prime example of how serving a higher authority can be motivated and reinforced by self-interest. In a broader context, the entire structure of the family—with a father and mother at its head—is designed to create a self-contained and self-centered institution for doing good. In the aggregate, all these institutions are what provide for a stable and good world. The family ultimately becomes the

stepping stone to selfless efforts on behalf of those who are outside of our immediate family and community.

The Sixth Plague

Once we have destroyed the false icons, appreciated the value of every effort, and built up our self-esteem (by realizing the uniqueness of our G-dly soul and the at even our animal side has positive energy that can and should be harnessed for the good) we are ready for "tough love." We are ready for the educational aspect of the sixth plague of boils.

What was unique about this plague?

It was the first plague that actually struck the very bodies of the Egyptians. Their incapacitation as a result of this plague went so far that the Torah testifies, "they could no longer stand before Moses."

Figuratively, this plague is about demolishing our "Egyptian" body, which is a metaphor for the entire thought structure and Weltanschauung that derives from our environment and that ultimately is what defines who we are. Before we rebuild a new and healthy structure, represented by the phrase "standing before Moses," we must divest ourselves of the Egyptian influence, which is systemic, and therefore threatens our very existence.

This plague is therefore the parallel of the Sixth

Commandment "Do not murder," because like murder that destroys the entire person, the individual who is afflicted with the Egyptian mindset has effectively allowed it to destroy his entire system.

For this plague-therapy to be effective, however, it had to be preceded by the previous five. One should never "demolish" someone else's structure, even if it is deleterious to them, without first putting in place a back-up system that provides positive reinforcement and a sense of value.

In general terms all of exile can be likened to the plague of boils that as Kabbalists have taught us, is a process that refines us by removing the Egyptian body from our Jewish souls and makes us receptive for the revelation of G-dliness that will accompany the future Redemption.